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### Publication Date

2012

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Racial Distinctions in Middle-Class Motherhood:  
Ideologies and Practices of African-American Middle-Class Mothers

By

Dawn Marie Dow

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Raka Ray, Chair  
Professor Barrie Thorne  
Professor Evelyn Nakano Glenn

Fall 2012







## Abstract

### Racial Distinctions in Middle-Class Motherhood: Ideologies and Practices of African-American Middle-Class Mothers

by

Dawn Marie Dow

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Raka Ray, Chair

My dissertation examines how intersections of racial identity, class and gender influence the cultural expectations and decisions of African-American middle-class mothers regarding work, family and parenting. Through this research I challenge three dominant sets of ideologies present in family, work and parenting scholarship. First, I challenge the widespread acceptance of the *Intensive Mothering* ideology that views mothers as principally responsible for raising their children within a nuclear family context. Second, I challenge the conflict paradigm that assumes a mother's decisions about work and family can be captured in a competing spheres framework. This framework assumes that mothers who allot more time to work have a stronger "work devotion" and those who allot more time to family have a stronger "family devotion." Third, I challenge the assumption that middle-class parents are primarily influenced by their class status when parenting their children and primarily use the concerted cultivation parenting approach. This approach emphasizes encouraging children's logical reasoning, developing their intellectual and physical skills through organized enrichment activities and viewing educational and other institutions in society from an entitlements and service oriented perspective.

Using sixty in-depth semi-structured interviews of African-American middle-class mothers living in the San Francisco Bay Area I investigate three sets of questions. First, how do these mothers approach family, work and parenting? Second, what explains their distinctive strategies? Third, how does this case of mothers help to illuminate the range of mothering and parenting ideals and practices influencing all mothers' choices and what are the consequences of not conforming to dominant ideals and practices? My findings suggest that the ideologies that dominate family and work life scholarship do not adequately capture the cultural prerogatives of all mothers. Specifically, African-American middle-class mothers are influenced by a different orientation to mothering and parenting that I call the *"Integrated Mothering Ideology."* This ideology assumes that 1) childcare is a mother-centered, but extended-family and community-supported activity, 2) working outside of the home is a duty of motherhood and 3) mothers consistently consider issues related to racial identity, class and gender when making parenting decisions with the aim towards fostering specific orientations to African-American middle-class identity. Overall my findings demonstrate that middle-class mothers' approaches to managing work and family are influenced by racially situated identities, ideologies and practices that are supported by specific social, economic, cultural and structural circumstances.



## Table of Contents

List of Tables		ii
Acknowledgements		iii
Chapter One	Introduction: African-American Middle-Class Mothers' Perspectives on Family, Work and Parenting	1
Chapter Two	Cultural Distinctions in Motherhood: Extended Family Mothering in Contemporary African-American Middle-Class Mothers' Lives	19
Chapter Three	Integrated Devotions: Negotiating Archetypes and Stereotypes of African-American Womanhood	46
Chapter Four	Cultivating Consciousness: Crossing, Policing and Transcending Raced, Classed and Gendered Borders	75
Chapter Five	Conclusion: Integrated Mothering- An Alternative Ideology of Family, Work and Parenting	104
	References	110



## List of Tables

<u>Table 1.1</u>	A Comparison of Ideologies of Motherhood	3
<u>Table 1.2</u>	Percentage Change in Population in Bay Area Cities From 2000 to 2010 Census	12
<u>Table 1.3</u>	Sample Characteristics	14
<u>Table 4.1</u>	Intersectional Approaches to Parenting	101
<u>Table 5.1</u>	Integrated Mothering Ideology	105



## Acknowledgements

Completing this dissertation, while raising twin infants, then toddlers and now school-aged children was at times challenging, but was always worthwhile and I would do it again in an instant. It is often said that it takes a village to raise a child, but I think it also takes a village to support a graduate student as she completes her dissertation. These acknowledgements are intended to reflect what has been an undeniable truth for me throughout this process; writing may, at times, be a solitary process but completing a project of this scope and depth cannot be accomplished alone. I deeply appreciate the community of scholars and friends who provided me with generous feedback, thoughtful criticism and emotional and intellectual support throughout my research and writing. Without their support, their belief in and respect for me as a scholar, and a person in the larger world with non-academic demands, this dissertation would not have been possible.

I must start by thanking the chair of my dissertation committee, Raka Ray. From the beginning she believed in this project and called it the dissertation she wanted someone to write. Raka challenged me to show how my research not only diversified what we know about work, family and parenting by giving voice to the experiences of African-American middle-class mothers, but she also encouraged me to accept the challenge of exposing fundamental assumptions within that body of research. Despite being the advisor of numerous other dissertations, throughout this process Raka showed that she cared about my intellectual and professional development as well as my life outside of graduate school (as if these can be easily separated).

I also received invaluable insight and support from my committee members, Barrie Thorne and Evelyn Nakano Glenn. Barrie pushed me to explore the complexity in the lives of the mothers I studied. She encouraged me to honor their shared and divergent experiences and to be precise in the concepts I was using to describe them. The many conversations I had with her in her office and house enhanced my analysis. I also appreciate the care she took in reading my work, her detailed feedback, and the interest she took in my intellectual and personal life. I thank Evelyn Nakano Glenn for her contributions to the intellectual foundation of this dissertation. Her research on mothering greatly informed this work. Evelyn pushed me to consider how changing social constraints and opportunities shape the life trajectories and expectations of mothers.

In addition to my formal dissertation committee, I am fortunate to have had others at UC Berkeley take an interest in my dissertation research and my intellectual development. Two years before I completed my dissertation I became a graduate fellow at what is now called the Center for the Study of Societal Issues (CSSI). Through this fellowship I had the opportunity to benefit from the wisdom and expertise of the three program directors and my cohort of graduate fellows. David Minkus and Deborah Lustig deserve special thanks. They carefully read, provided critical feedback and pushed me to sharpen my analysis in what would ultimately become the introduction to my dissertation. Christine Trost read each of the chapters of this dissertation, often at very early stages. She was extremely generous and honest with her feedback and her advice contributed to the overall quality of my dissertation. I also thank my cohort of fellows: Nicole Lindahl, Willow Amam, Alina Polyakova, Karin Martin, Naomi Hsu, Lindsey Dillon and



Nu-Anh Tran, who helped me ensure my findings remained clear and understandable to a broad range of audiences.

The seeds of this dissertation began both in Laura Enriquez's interviewing class and the master's thesis I completed under the guidance and supervision of Sandra Smith. Each of these individuals contributed to my early intellectual development and to this research. I will always appreciate Laura's call in the classroom to first consider what I found valuable in a scholarly work before preceding to my critique of it. I thank Sandra for being one of the first to see the value in focusing a study on African-American middle-class mothers and for indelibly marking me with a desire to identify the stasis, disruption and resolution in my research. While neither Irene Bloemraad or Catherine Albiston were directly involved in my dissertation, on multiple occasions each gave me invaluable advice. I feel extremely lucky to have benefited from their guidance as I embarked on this research, and for their advice regarding my professional development. Gloria Chun also took an interest in my research and provided me with several opportunities to share it with a broader audience.

I also benefited from the support of several formally organized groups at UC Berkeley. Each group helped me add layers of complexity to my research. The chair of my dissertation- Raka Ray- organized one of these groups. Several times a year various pieces of my dissertation were closely read and critiqued by a group of intellectual powerhouses that included Kate Mason, Katie Hasson, Oluwakemi Balogun Sarah Anne Minkin, Jenny Carlson, Kate Maich, Abigail Andrews, Jordana Matlon and Kimberley Kay Hoang. A special debt of gratitude is owed to these amazing women. In addition, the quality of my dissertation was also enhanced by the feedback I received from members of U.C. Berkeley's Gender Workshop and the Interdisciplinary Family Working Group.

When I entered graduate school several senior graduate students told me that what got them through the dissertation writing process was being the member of a writing group. They gave me the advice to find fellow graduate students whose advice I valued and, importantly, who supported each other through what can be both a stressful and lonely process. I took those words to heart and throughout the writing process I was grateful to have participated in a weekly writing group that included at various times Gretchen Purser, Katie Hasson, Silvia Pasquetti, Sarah Gilman and Siri Colom. These scholars provided me with unending encouragement and emotional support as we discussed our research late into the evening over cups of coffee or the occasional glass of wine. This group provided me not only with feedback on my research but it also served as a safe space in which to discuss a broad array of ideas and concerns. Katie Hasson has been a true friend. We entered the doctoral program at the same time and it is my honor to have made our final departure together.

My research also benefited from the financial support of several grants and fellowships. I am grateful to UC Berkeley's Center for Race and Gender and the Sociology Department for providing me with small research grants to fund various parts of the research process. I would also like to thank CSSI for providing a stipend that afforded me the luxury of being able to focus on writing my dissertation for the final two years of graduate school without juggling significant teaching responsibilities.



My friends at Berkeley also provided enormous support as I completed my research. They were each a critical part of the community that I needed to survive and thrive in graduate school. I am fortunate to count Ruha Benjamin, Tianna Paschel, Jennifer Jones, Jennifer Randles, Hana Brown, Margo Mahan, Jessica Cobb, Osagie Obasogie, Freeden Ouer and Trevor Gardner as members of my extended family of scholars and friends. In addition to my U.C. Berkeley community of friends I was also lucky to develop meaningful friendships with people outside of the confines of the academy. Spending time with Stefanianna Moore, Todd Jackson, Sarah Sanford-Smith and Jason Rabinowitz and their respective children helped me maintain balance in my life. I am honored to count them among my friends.

I am grateful for the frequent assistance Elsa Tranter and, her successor, Carolyn Clark provided me in graduate school. Each of these women always had an encouraging word as they helped me navigate the bureaucratic maze of the academy. In addition, the UC System, and particularly UC Berkeley, could not exist without the effort and devotion of its staff, whether administrative, clerical, building and grounds maintenance, or otherwise. I am thankful for the all too often “invisible labor” these individuals have provided.

Prior to starting graduate school my sociological imagination was sparked at Bryn Mawr College. Mary Osirim, Robert Washington and David Karen each contributed to that initial spark and under their mentorship each gave me opportunities to grapple with the empirical realities of the social world using newly acquired sociological frameworks.

A special note of gratitude is owed to every person who participated in this research and referred a potential participant to me. Thanks for taking time away from your families and your jobs to open up to me about your life’s challenges and triumphs. Thanks for carving out time after bedtime and during outings to the park with your children to share deeply personal beliefs and experiences about work, family and parenting. I cannot express publicly and in individual terms how privileged I feel to be the person with whom you shared your perspectives and I hope I have done them justice as I present them to a wider audience.

In the last two paragraphs of these acknowledgements I would like to thank my immediate and extended family. My parents, Vernetta and Kenneth Dow, are among the most intelligent people that I know. I thank both of them for listening to me talk about my research and asking me, in often very direct ways, to explain why it was important to folks outside of the academy. I also appreciate how my sisters Vernetta Dow and Gay Webb reminded me that what I was doing was important even when I sometimes questioned that fact myself. In addition, my parents-in-law, Yvonne Paterson and Milton Rossman provided me with valued support throughout this endeavor.

Finally, I thank my spouse, Teague Paterson and our two daughters, Lucy and Lillian Dow Paterson. Teague was an unending source of support and always valued my work equally to his own, even when the market disagreed. I know that it was challenging for him to balance his career with supporting mine. Teague is and has been a true partner in this regard and in parenting our incredible daughters. Lillian and Lucy have added an additional layer of laughter, joy and understanding to my life. I am privileged to be able to watch them as they learn about, observe and participate in the world around them.



## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction: African-American Middle-Class Mothers' Perspectives on Family, Work and Parenting**

I interviewed Christine<sup>1</sup> in her office in between client meetings. Despite being engaged to marry a white man with whom she had been in a relationship with for many years, Christine described how she started to feel more African American after she became a mother. While she described having many good white friends whose company she enjoyed, after becoming a mother she found herself seeking out other African-American middle-class mothers and children as friends for herself and her son. When Christine frequented parks in predominately white neighborhoods and participated in extra-curricular activities comprised primarily of white mothers and children she never felt completely at ease or accepted in those locations. Christine believed that white middle-class mothers distanced themselves from her and her son in public settings like parks or extracurricular activities. Based on these experiences and her involvement in an African-American middle-class mothers' group, Christine believed African-American and white middle-class mothers had different parenting concerns, took different approaches to raising their children and experienced motherhood differently. She said that "not feeling included in white motherhood society (2010)" was a key part of her experience as an African-American middle-class mother.

Existing research demonstrates that African-American middle-class mothers and their families face distinct challenges that may influence their beliefs and experiences related to motherhood and raising children. Despite these challenges little research has made African-American middle-class mothers its primary focus. As a consequence, what we know about these mothers can primarily be derived from studies of professional women (who may or may not be mothers) (Blair-Loy 2003; Blair-Loy and Dehart 2003; Bell and Nkomo 2003), middle-class mothers overall (Hays 1999; Arendell 1999); African-American mothers overall (Stack 1974; Landry 2003; Kennelly 1999), or African-American middle-class families (Patillo-McCoy 2003; Lacy 2007, 2002). We can glean from this research that African-American middle-class mothers have historically been more likely to work outside of the home than their white counterparts (Landry 2003). In the contemporary era, highly educated African-American mothers are more likely to return to work within the first year of raising a child (Yoon and Waite 1994) and when they return to work they experience a smaller wage penalty than do white mothers (Waldfogel 1997; Glauber 2007). Highly educated African-Americans are also more likely to live in extended families with older relatives (Kamo 2000), who perhaps serve as caregivers for their children. More generally, African-American women who have attained middle-class status through upward mobility are more likely to have strong relationships with their mothers and their kin networks (Higginbotham and Weber 1992; Wharton and Thorne 1997). Related to this upward mobility, middle-class African-Americans overall have kin networks characterized by social class diversity and are more likely to have parents and siblings whose incomes fall below the poverty line (Chiteji and Derrick 2002; Heflin and Patillo-McCoy 2000, 2002). When we consider African-American middle-class parents overall, they tend to make fewer gender distinctions when raising their children and rank education at the top of their list of priorities (instead of happiness as do white middle-class parents) (Hill and Sprague 1999). In addition,

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed.



despite occupying a more privileged class position African-American middle-class parents continue to worry about providing for their children (Hill and Sprague 1999) and those living in poor communities highlight the challenges they face in ensuring their children stay on a path that will enable them to retain their middle-class status instead of following a less desirable path of downward mobility (Anderson 2000). Indeed, based on recent research regarding the higher rates of downward mobility among African-American children raised in middle-class families, these parents' concerns are not unreasonable (Sharkey 2009).

Revisiting Christine's story from above, by "white motherhood society," she was referencing a certain set of ideologies and practices of motherhood and parenting that are widespread in society and are the focus of discussions and critiques within family and work-life scholarship. I argue that three sets of ideologies dominate scholarship examining mothers' decisions related to work, family and parenting and when mothers do not conform to these ideologies' prescribed practices they often feel compelled to explain their non-compliance. The first set of these ideologies assumes the widespread acceptance of the belief that being a good mother requires women to primarily focus on their children and families (Hays 1999; Blair-Loy 2003) within a nuclear family context. While various scholars have identified and critiqued versions of this ideology of motherhood (Smith 1993; Hays 1999; J. Williams 2001; Blair-Loy 2003), "the intensive mothering ideology," most closely tied to Sharon Hays (1999) can serve as its exemplar. This ideology views mothers as principally responsible for raising their children. It also demands they make enormous financial and emotional investments in their children and be intimately involved with every aspect of their children's development (Hays 1999). The second set of ideologies that dominates this literature views society as divided into two separate and incompatible spheres -the public sphere of work and the private sphere of the family. Complementing the ideology of separate spheres, the cult of domesticity emphasizes four key virtues of "true womanhood": piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Landry 2003; Williams 2001). The separate spheres ideology and the cult of domesticity both emerged during the industrial revolution and became a part of the dominant public discourse on womanhood. Together these ideologies encouraged women to dedicate themselves to the private sphere of the home so men could focus on the public sphere of work. The third set of ideologies that dominates this literature assumes that material resources and, specifically, class status determines parenting approaches. Thus, middle-class parents believed to use the concerted cultivation approach-a strategy meant to reproduce children's middle-class status by emphasizing the cultural and social capital that will allow them to comfortably attain and inhabit middle-class lives (Lareau 2003).

These three sets of ideologies of motherhood, work/family balance and parenting were derived from research that has primarily focused on the beliefs and experiences of white middle-class mothers and their families (Hay 1999; Blair-Loy 2003) or has included other groups but prioritized analyzing class distinctions over distinctions based on racial identity (Arendell 1999; Lareau 2003) even when such distinctions are evident in the data (Choo and Ferree 2010). Longstanding cultural traditions and practices that date back to and before slavery challenge the influence of these ideologies in the lives of African Americans overall, and women, in particular (Burgess 1994; Jones 1985). In addition, although African-American middle-class mothers have been exposed to these dominant ideologies, they have historically been structurally, culturally, and economically excluded from embracing their practices (Collins 2000; Glenn 1994; Jones



1985). This exclusion has had both theoretical and empirical implications for what it means for African-American middle-class mothers to be good mothers, for how they approach work and family decisions, and for how they parent their children. Examining these implications, in this dissertation, I answer three sets of questions. First, how do African-American middle-class mothers approach family, work and parenting? Second, what explains their distinctive strategies? Third, how does the case of African-American middle-class mothers help to illuminate the range of mothering and parenting ideals and practices that influence all mothers' choices and what are the consequences, both positive and negative, of not conforming to dominant ideals and practices?

Ultimately I argue that the ideologies and, related practices of, intensive mothering (Hays 1999), competing spheres (Blair-Loy 2003) and concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003) do not adequately capture the cultural prerogatives of all mothers, and particularly African-American middle-class mothers. Using in-depth interviews with sixty African-American middle-class mothers, I expand on, critique and revise existing family and work-life scholarship by demonstrating that motherhood and parenting practices are not just shaped by class status but are equally shaped by racially and gender situated identities, ideologies and cultural orientations. Taken together, my findings suggest that African-American middle-class mothers are influenced by a different orientation to mothering and parenting that I call the “*Integrated Mothering Ideology*.” This ideology of mothering and parenting assumes that 1) childcare is a mother-centered, but extended-family and community-supported activity, 2) working outside of the home is a duty of motherhood, and 3) mothers consistently consider issues related to racial identity, gender and class when making parenting decisions with the aim towards fostering specific orientations to African-American middle-class identity in their children. In **Table 1.1** I outline the key differences between the dominant sets of ideologies presented in existing family and work life scholarship and what I present as the *Integrated Mothering Ideology*.

**Table 1.1**  
**A Comparison of Ideologies of Motherhood**

	Dominant Theoretical Assumptions	Integrated Mothering Ideology
Childcare	Intensive Mothering: Mother is the Primary or Exclusive Caregiver.	Extended Mothering: Mother Focused but Extended Family and Community Supported.
Work and Family	Competing Devotions: Paid Employment Conflicts with Being a Mother.	Integrated Devotions: Paid Employment is a Duty of Mothers.
Parenting	Concerted Cultivation: Class Trumps Race in Influencing Parenting	Cultivating Consciousness: Race Conscious Middle-class Parenting

In this research I use a definition of ideology that has been laid out in the works of Raymond Williams (1995). Williams (1995:26) defines ideology as, “the characteristic world-view or general perspective of a class, or social group, which will include formal and conscious beliefs but also less conscious, less formulated attitudes, habits and feelings or even unconscious, assumptions, bearings and commitments.” Adopting this definition of ideology, I capture the taken-for-granted practices related to motherhood and parenting that are shared by African-



American middle-class mothers while simultaneously acknowledging that these practices may not be reflected in the lived experience of all African-American middle-class mothers. In addition, while this version of ideology is grounded in the quotidian activities of community members, this does not mean that it cannot possess characteristics that serve to dominate and oppress group members. I also uncover how the ideologies recognized by mothers support or challenge their daily decisions and practices. Thus, to paraphrase Alford Young (2004: 18), I sought to interrogate how the ideologies, worldviews and belief systems of the mothers that I interviewed were formulated in relationship to their life circumstances and their vision of their own future and the future of their children.

Scholars of intersectionality argue that feminist researchers have often assumed that the experiences of white mothers and their related worldviews or ideologies can be generalized to all women and thus have either downplayed or ignored the diversity in mothers' experiences (Collins 2000; Glenn 1992; Zinn 1994). When scholarship has focused on the experiences of African-Americans the implicit comparison or reference group is generally whites. While using whites, or in this case, white middle-class mothers, as the reference group, can serve as an important analytical tool to underscore differences and similarities there are also dangers to this comparative approach. This approach may prevent researchers from uncovering the value and utility in different groups' practices and result in labeling African-American families and mothers who deviate from the norm as pathological and/or naturalizing dominant approaches to family and work (Dill 1979). The present research shifts the center of focus to African-American middle-class mothers to explore the variations and commonalities in their ideologies and practices. Nonetheless these mothers are often implicitly and, at times, explicitly compared to white middle-class mothers. Distinctions between these groups of mothers- whether across racial groups or within racial groups- should not be seen as a failure of one group to live up to a preferred societal standard or norm. In short, no hierarchical ordering should be implied by these comparisons. In addition, rather than uncovering the singular variable that influences mothers' family, work and parenting decisions I uncover how all mothers are influenced by multiple axis of identity.

Using an intersectional approach I examine the ideologies and practices of African-American middle-class mothers to identify how racial identity, class, gender and demographic background influence the shared and divergent concerns of mothers when making decisions regarding work, family and parenting. I argue that, while, at times, racial identity, class and gender have more salient impacts on the experiences and practices of mothers, no master identity or process is definitively more influential than another. These varied identities and processes mutually constitute each other. Responding to Choo and Ferree's (2005:131) critique of existing scholarship on women of color, this research includes the perspectives and not just people from diverse groups, it challenges the relationships of power for the often unmarked category of white middle-class motherhood, and treats inequalities as multiply-determined and intertwined rather than assuming a dominant framework. In addition, rather than trying to disentangle the role of culture and structure in influencing a mother's decisions, I examine how culture and structure work together.



## Theoretical Framing

Various referred to as the “standard North American family” (Smith 1993), the “cult of domesticity” (J. Williams 2001), “the family devotion schema” (Blair-Loy 2003), “intensive mothering” (Hays 1999) and concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003), the ideologies that dominate scholarship on motherhood, work and family and parenting share three core tenets. First, these ideologies of motherhood envision mothers as principally responsible for raising their children within a nuclear family form. Second, these frameworks consider working outside of the home as conflicting with being a good mother (Blair-Loy 2003; Hays 1999). Third, this scholarship suggests that all middle-class mothers share similar concerns, motivations and strategies when parenting their children. Within this body of research mothers are often implicitly assumed to be white, middle or upper-middle-class, stay-at-home mothers who are married to a man who is the principal financial provider (Smith 1993; Hays 1999; Arendell 1999). Scholars of work and family have critiqued these ideologies and described how they influence the beliefs, practices and experiences of mothers in the family, the workplace and other institutions within society. Nonetheless, this research has often neglected the variations among mothers in the United States and, even when using samples that contain diversity, have failed to meaningfully investigate if these ideologies of motherhood and parenting are widely shared across racial and class divisions (Hays 1999; Blair-Loy 2003; Arendell 1999; Lareau 2003). In short, existing research has failed to adequately incorporate an intersectional analysis of how class, race and gender work together in influencing decisions related to family, work and childrearing (Choo and Ferree 2010).

### *More than Nuclear Families*

Despite the presentation of the nuclear family as the dominant and normative family form in modern capitalist society (Parsons 1955), some scholars have noted that extended family networks continue to play a key role in helping many families manage work and family obligations, particularly among racial/ethnic minorities (Sarkisian, Gerena and Gerstel 2007; Lee and Aytac 1998; Higginbotham and Weber 1992; Kamo 2000). Scholars have identified the presence of extended family networks within the African-American community and how these networks assist mothers with childcare and managing the demands of work and family (Stack 1974; Collins 2000; Higginbotham and Weber 1992). These networks of support have been identified as particularly important for upwardly mobile African-American mothers (Higginbotham and Weber 1992). Lynet Uttal’s (1999) research also suggests that African-Americans mothers tend to prefer kin - extended and immediate family members- to care for their children while white mothers do not have this same preference, instead preferring to use paid childcare providers for their children. In addition, while research has demonstrated that kin-care is decreasing in use among lower income African-American mothers (Brewster and Padavic 2002; McDonald and Armstrong 2001), these networks of care have actually been retained and have increased in their strength and utilization among middle and upper-middle-class African-American mothers (Brewster and Padavic 2002; Higginbotham and Weber 1992). Thus, rather than viewing kin-care as an adaptation to childcare based on the material constraints of African-American mothers, this research suggests that African-American mothers also choose kin-care for non-pecuniary reasons.



Research has also demonstrated that grandparents are increasingly taking on the role of primary caregiver for their grandchildren and that this is more frequent among African Americans (Gibson 2005; Taylor, Livingston, Parker, Wang and Dockterman 2010). Indeed, in recent years, more than one in ten grandparents have become the primary caregiver for a grandchild for six months or more and many for much longer periods (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler and Driver 1997). In addition, although the nuclear family form has been presented as an adaptation to advanced modern society, research suggests that during the industrial revolution, families that continued to utilize extended family networks fared better economically than their nuclear family counterparts (Sennett 1970). Thus, while African Americans and a variety of ethnic and racial groups are described as deviating from the ideal nuclear family form, these groups' preferences for extended family formations are potentially better suited for managing work and family challenges and the frequent reconfigurations of family form prevalent in modern society. Indeed, research conducted by Vern Bengtson (2001) suggests that extended family connections are becoming increasingly important to all families regardless of racial or economic background.

### *Combining Work and Motherhood*

The view that the public arena of work and the private arena of family are separate spheres with conflicting logics originated during the period of the industrial revolution (Landry 2003; J. Williams 2001; Hays 1999). During the same period that the separate spheres ideology emerged the cult of domesticity, an ideology that proposed women should devote themselves to caring for the home, was also gaining a foothold within the American imagination. Many scholars saw the emergence of these ideologies and their related gendered division of the family as a necessary precursor for the development of modern capitalism (Weber 1930). In the modern era, this view of the division between the public and private sphere has been captured in the competing spheres framework (Blair-Loy 2003). According to the logic of competing spheres, those mothers who allot more time to work are viewed as having a stronger "work devotion" and those who allot more time to family are viewed as having a stronger "family devotion." While fathers can demonstrate their devotion to their families through their time spent working and their duties as breadwinner; mothers are precluded from doing so (Blair-Loy 2003).

Contemporary scholars researching the family have critiqued the view that working outside of the home conflicts with being a mother primarily by underscoring the presence of working mothers throughout history. For example, Garey (1999), Kessler-Harris (2003), Coontz (2000) and Arendell (1999) have described how the work and family divide that is presented in scholarly literature has been challenged empirically. Anita Garey (1999) describes how some women have been able to retain or achieve an identity in the public sphere and maintain an identity in the private sphere. Scholars have also described the reality that poor, working and, even, middle-class white mothers have engaged in paid work both inside and outside of the home (Garey 1999; Steedman 1987; Coontz 2000). However, these scholars maintain that these mothers continue to be influenced by dominant ideologies of motherhood and parenting when evaluating and making choices about family and work, even when their actions do not conform to these ideologies' prescribed practices (Hays 1999; Blair-Loy 2003; Arendell 1999). Thus, while some mothers have been able to maintain a presence within the public and private spheres of work and family, they have largely been construed as conflicted in their choice to do so. In



addition, these mothers are assumed to be participating in the public sphere of paid employment primarily as a consequence of economic necessity, rather than based on other motivations. Left unexplored, however, is the accuracy of the assumption that mothers who work outside are indeed conflicted by that decision. This assumption is particularly problematic for African-American mothers who have had a long history in the labor force (Jones 1985; Glenn 1991, 2002; Landry 2003) and who were forcibly brought to this country to produce and reproduce workers (Jones 1985; Glenn 1992). In addition, African-American mothers are more likely to prefer full-time work while raising young children than white mothers (Taylor, Funk and Clark 2007), they return to work more quickly after having a child (Joesch 1993) and incur smaller wage penalties after becoming mothers (Waldfogel 1997). In short, this body of scholarship, focusing on the experiences of white middle class mothers, naturalizes a specific configuration of work and family for mothers, what I refer to in *Chapter 3* as the *market/family nexus*, and it ignores how different racial groups of women have been influenced by different cultural expectations of how work should be incorporated into their lives as adult women and mothers.

### *Class and Racially Conscious Based Parenting*

Family and work life scholarship largely also assumes that middle-class families, share a common outlook regarding what is best for their children. These parents are believed to use a common approach to parent their children and cultivate their middle-class status (Kaufman 2005; Lareau 2003). Most notably, in *Unequal Childhoods*, through in-depth interviews and observations of a small but socio-economically diverse group of African-American and White families, Annette Lareau (2003) concludes that socioeconomic class is more important in determining parenting practices than is racial identity. She argues that both African-American and white middle-class parents utilize concerted cultivation when raising their children. This approach to parenting emphasizes cultivating logical reasoning in children, exposing children to organized intellectual and physical enrichment activities and encouraging children to view educational institutions from the perspective of what services they can provide and what services they are entitled to receive (Lareau 2003).

While Lareau (2003) acknowledges that African-American middle-class parents employ additional strategies beyond those employed by white middle-class parents, she downplays how middle-class parenting strategies are influenced by racial identity for both African-American and white parents, and the different motivations and concerns that influence African-American middle-class parents' approaches to parenting (Choo and Ferree 2010). Thus, in her analysis, transporting a child to a church choir practice or a high priced violin lesson or to an athletic league in their middle-class neighborhood or to one across town in a more economically diverse community serves the same functional purposes. As I will show in Chapter 4, African-American middle-class mothers' choices have different meanings and goals in mind for their children. As a consequence these mothers are very likely to look outside of their neighborhood for their children's activities because of concerns and objectives related to cultivating specific versions of racial and class based identities. While Lareau (2003) acknowledges social divisions and economic stratification characterize our society, she largely assumes that once individuals acquire certain markers of middle-class status such as a college education or homeownership, those markers predominantly define their life trajectories. She also (2003) assumes that middle-class status is accompanied by a shared set of values, economic support, cultural opportunities



and advantages. Elsewhere, scholars have demonstrated that these markers of middle-class status are not accompanied by the same material benefits or security across racial groupings (Shapiro and Oliver 1997; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Hill and Sprague 2001).

Being a member of the middle class is assumed to come with certain advantages including access to better school systems, occupational and residential opportunities, and neighborhoods characterized by less crime. However, numerous scholars have highlighted that despite the expansion of the African-American middle class, its members and their families face economic, social, residential and educational opportunities that are substantively different from middle-class whites (Landry 2003; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Lacy 2007; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Conley 1999). In addition, although the Civil Rights movement accomplished notable legal gains, members of the African-American middle-class continue to face varying degrees of discrimination in lending, housing (Roscigno, Karafin and Tester 2009; Massey, Gross and Shibuya 1994) and occupational opportunities (Pager 2003). Based on the historical legacy of *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination in the United States, African-American families possess far less wealth than their white counterparts (Shapiro and Oliver 1997; Taylor, Fry, and Kochhar 2011; Conley 1999). In addition, members of the African-American middle-class are often the first in their families to attain that status. As result, these families typically do not have parents with accumulated wealth who can help them buy into better neighborhoods than they would be able to afford on their own (Shapiro and Oliver 1997; Conley 1999). In fact, members of the African-American middle-class are often asked for financial assistance from their parents and relatives instead of receiving such assistance (Heflin and Pattillo 2000, 2002). In addition, based on how the public educational system is structured, children of the African-American middle-class families are often educated in schools that are poorly funded, lack adequate infrastructure, and are characterized by lower levels of student achievement (Patillo-McCoy 1999). These children are also more likely to grow up in neighborhoods that have higher levels of crime and that do not have the same level of community services as their white middle-class peers (Shapiro and Oliver 1997, Patillo-McCoy 1999). In short, being African American diminishes the privileges that accompany middle-class status and reduces the resources present in the everyday lives of families to enact the intensive child-raising practices that Lareau (2003) and other scholars (Hays 1999) treat as normative middle-class patterns.

In addition to macro-structural differences, scholars have demonstrated that African-American parents view preparing their children for the race-related challenges they will likely face during their lives as a key parenting duty (Tatum 1999; Feagin and Sikes 1994). These challenges differ if their children are raised in mixed-socioeconomic African-American neighborhoods, middle-class African-American neighborhoods, or predominately white neighborhoods. Despite varying class backgrounds, the experience of racial discrimination at times serves to unify African Americans concerns related to parenting. Indeed, research conducted by Hill and Sprague (2001) suggest that while white parents from different class backgrounds differ in their rankings of priorities for their children, African-American parents remain consistent in their ranking of priorities irrespective of class background. Middle -class and lower income African American parents also share concerns about their ability to financially provide for their children. Recent research indicating that nearly fifty percent of African-American children raised in middle-class families experience downward mobility, as compared to sixteen percent of white children from middle-class families, support these concerns (Sharkey



2009). Thus for African-American middle-class parents the goal of reproducing middle-class status for the next generation cannot be taken for granted.

In addition, while African Americans have traditionally been thought to share cultural, political and economic perspectives and view their fates as linked to each other (Dawson 2001), recent research has begun to question that assumption. A report produced by the Pew Charitable Trust Foundation has highlighted that forty percent of African Americans believe that they can no longer be considered to be part of a single race given perceived increasing differences in the values of middle-class and lower income African Americans (Kohut et al. 2007). This belief was most strongly held by African Americans at the economic extremes- upper-income and poor. In addition, research conducted by Karyn Lacy (2007) has uncovered that some members of the African-American middle class choose to highlight their racial and or class identity depending on the social context. This emerging scholarship suggests that there is both increasing diversity in how African-American middle-class members choose to identify and enduring shared concerns.

### *An Intersectional Analysis of Motherhood, Work, Family and Parenting*

Scholars examining intersections of racial identity, class and gender within the context of the family have argued that these dominant ideologies of mothering and parenting, identified above, may have been internalized by the majority of white mothers, but mothers from other racial, ethnic and class backgrounds have never been encouraged to embrace them. Instead mothers of color, specifically African-American middle-class mothers, have actively created and reproduced different beliefs and practices related to motherhood and parenting (Collins 2000, 1987; Landry 2003). Intersectional scholars also emphasize that in the face of negative societal evaluations, African-American women and mothers have been proactive in defining what they value and how they view themselves (Collins 2000; Lorde 1984). These communities of mothers were influenced by ideologies that reflected their own daily experiences and the needs of their communities (Segura 1994; Landry 2003; Collins 2000).

Denise Segura (1994) has most directly challenged the assumption of the widespread acceptance of the intensive mothering ideology and the related paradigm of competing spheres. In Segura's (1994) research, she suggests that Chicana mothers accepted the "American based" intensive mothering ideology and as a result experienced internal conflict when they worked outside of the home. By contrast, she found that Mexican immigrant mothers accepted a Mexican based ideology of motherhood that prioritizes maternal employment and, as consequence they did not experience internal conflict when working, but instead experienced conflict when they were stay-at-home mothers. Segura suggests that these different orientations to motherhood are shaped by differences in cultural contexts, U.S. versus Mexico. In addition, Segura (1994) implicitly makes an argument about assimilation into dominant frameworks of motherhood, and specifically the intensive mothering ideology. Thus, through exposure to the cultural context of the U.S., Chicana women have come to accept dominant ideologies of motherhood while Mexican immigrant women have been more greatly impacted by the cultural context of Mexico and its mothering ideologies. I suggest that within the United States the cultural context of motherhood is not as uniform as Segura assumes. The U.S. cultural context has historic and contemporary divisions along racial, cultural, economic and political identity.



While much of the scholarship on parenting neglects African-American middle-class mothers, the scholarship that does exist stresses that African-American middle-class mothers parent their children within social contexts that are shaped by different resources and concerns than those of white middle-class mothers at both the macro and micro level (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Tatum 1999). Understanding these differences in concerns and access to resources sheds light on the challenges African-American middle-class families face in reproducing middle-class status for the next generation. Thus, to fully understand the experiences and outlook of middle-class mothers regarding family, work and parenting we must use an intersectional theoretical and methodological framework to examine how mothers' beliefs and practices are differently shaped by their racial, ethnic and class identity.

Intersectional scholars incorporate several key features into their analysis when examining race, class and gender. As a theoretical and analytical framework, intersectionality emphasizes the diversity between and within racial groups. These scholars urge researchers to investigate the interrelatedness and intersections of multiple sites of oppression and underscore that these intersections are greater than the sums of their parts (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1984). Thus the experiences of African-American middle-class mothers cannot be analyzed by merely adding race (read African-American men), gender (read white women), middle class (read white and middle-class) and mothers (read white middle-class, married and heterosexual mothers). Intersectional scholars also urge us to mark the unmarked and normative categories of power and privilege (Frankenburg 1994; Solinger 1994; Collins 2000; hooks 1984). The aim is not just to uncover the subjectivity of women of color but also to uncover the subjectivity of the taken for granted norm of whiteness and middle-class status.

Intersectionality also proposes that we take certain methodological and theoretical approaches to research (Choo and Ferree 2010; McCall 2005). Choo and Ferree (2005) and McCall (2005) separately identify three approaches for conducting intersectional research. McCall describes these approaches as anti-categorical- an approach that critiques the validity of "modern analytical categories" and views with suspicion the creation of such divisions; intracategorical- an approach that often focuses on specific group of people that are shaped by shared intersecting identities in order to reveal the complexity and diversity in their lives; and intercategorical- an approach that compares groups in different contexts to explain different outcomes of those groups (McCall 2005). Choo and Ferree (2010) describe approaches to intersectional research somewhat differently. Their categories include inclusion and process centered models and systemic intersectionality. They caution that while inclusion centered research often emphasizes giving voice to previously excluded groups this model at times fetishizes difference. In addition, the scholars conducting this type of research often frame their analysis using their own white middle-class values without critically analyzing those values or giving sufficient attention to the relationships of power between and among new voices and unmarked categories. Choo and Ferree (2005) describe the process-centered model as comparing different intersections in order to uncover how macro forces organize power and inequality. They criticize this approach for its propensity to construe individuals as primarily being directed by macro processes and lacking agency. These models also tend to try to adjudicate primary from secondary sources of inequality. Finally systemic intersectionality, the approach Choo and Ferree (2005) prefer, focuses on privileging the analysis of intersections over



seeking to uncover main effects. In this view of intersectional research all categories of identity remain within our analytical field to enable us to examine how they constitute each other.

This research straddles the inclusion/intracategorical models and the systemic models. As a scholar my aim is to walk a tight rope between explaining the divisions present among the mothers I interviewed and uncovering the elegant complexity of the intersections that shape their lived experiences. Not all of the mothers in this research neatly fit into the patterns that have emerged in my data. I include these exceptions to underscore that while the categories African American, middle class and mother shape each other they do not always do so in ways that produce the same experience. In the next section I set the stage for the stories of the mothers I interviewed by providing some background about shifts in the African-American population in the Bay Area and suggest how that has impacted their ability to connect with the African-American community more broadly, and specifically its middle class.

### **The African-American Population in the San Francisco Bay Area**

Landmark studies of the African-American middle class have often focused on providing a broad outline of the overall contours of the African-American middle class or have focused on geographic areas in the United States where African Americans have had a longstanding presence and have grown in size to a critical mass (Pattillo-McCoy 1999, Lacy 2007, Frazier 1962, Landry 2003). These geographic areas have included Philadelphia, Chicago and DC, each having larger African-American populations with sizeable and established middle-class neighborhoods. In the San Francisco Bay Area, the African-American community has never been large, and it has had a shorter historical presence, relative to some other areas of the country. The gold rush beginning in 1848 encouraged African Americans to move to San Francisco but by the turn of the century the African-American population remained small. According to the 1900 Census out of 342,782 residents in San Francisco, only 1654 residents were African American (bayareacensus.com). In addition, during the Great Migration, San Francisco and the Bay area overall was not a popular destination for African Americans migrating from the south because of distance, heightened competition for jobs and lack of economic opportunities (Broussard 1993). Indeed, it was not until World War II that the African-American population began to expand when San Francisco became one of the central locations for war-related jobs (Broussard 1993). During that period the African-American population in San Francisco expanded in size from approximately 4,850 (less than 1 percent of the population) in 1940 to approximately 43,000 (5.6 percent) in 1950, reaching its peak in 1970 at around 96,000 (13.4 percent) (bayareacensus.com). According to data taken from the 2010 Census African-Americans now represent a meager 6 percent of San Francisco's population. This is particularly notable given San Francisco is a city once known for the Fillmore District, a neighborhood that attracted many African Americans migrating to the area for work and became one of the cultural centers of jazz. Indeed the African-American population in San Francisco declined to such a degree that in 2005 its mayor, Gavin Newsom, created a task force to examine the problem of African-American out-migration from San Francisco.

Oakland (another city within the San Francisco Bay Area) followed similar spikes and declines in its population despite having a larger overall representation of African Americans. Before World War II African Americans comprised approximately 3% of Oakland's population.



During the war African Americans were attracted to the area due to war related industries and perceived lower levels of explicit discrimination (Hansen 1996). By the time the war ended African Americans comprised 12% of Oakland's population. By 1980 Oakland's African-American population reached its peak at approximately 47%. Now in a place once referred to as a "chocolate city" by musician George Clinton and where the Black Panther Party was founded, the African-American population has declined from approximately 44 percent of Oakland's population in 1990 to 27 percent in 2010 (bayareacensus.com). While African Americans still remain the largest ethnic group, their share of the population has dramatically decreased. Similarly in Berkeley, in 1970 the African-American population peaked at approximately 24 percent of the population and in 1980 it peaked in Richmond at 48 percent (bayareacensus.com). In 2010 the African-American population stood at approximately 27 percent in Richmond and 10 percent in Berkeley (bayareacensus.com). Oakland, Berkeley and Richmond have joined San Francisco and other cities nationwide that have established task forces to explore the problem of African-American out-migration.

Table 1.2 below indicates the percentage change in the African-American population in Bay Area cities since the 2000 Census (Williams et al. 2010). This out-migration has often been the result of middle and upper middle-class African Americans who have moved to suburbs including Antioch, Brentwood and Tract which have all experienced increases in their African-American population (Williams et al 2010). Many of those departing, from the San Francisco Bay Area have been middle-class African Americans who have left the city for neighborhoods in the East Bay and for places outside of California in search of better schools for their children and better housing and employment opportunities for themselves (Report of the San Francisco Mayor's Task Force 2009; Patillo-McCoy 2000; Ginwright and Akom n.d.).

**Table 1.2**  
**Percentage Change in Population in Bay Area Cities From 2000 to 2010 Census**

City	Percentage Change in Population ↑ or ↓
Oakland	↓ 23 % (-33,502)
San Francisco	↓ 19 % (-11,645)
Richmond	↓ 23 % (-8,235)
Berkeley	↓ 20 % (-2,365)
East Palo Alto	↓ 31 % (-2,092)
Vallejo	↓ 8 % (-2,083)
Daly City	↓ 24 % (-1,120)
San Jose	↓ 4 % (-1,107)
Brentwood	↑ 485 % (2,800)
Tracy	↑ 91 % (2,836)
Antioch	↑ 100 % (8,843)

At the county level, according to 2010 Census data, the African-American population has decreased in four out of nine counties in the San Francisco Bay Area (Williams et al. 2010). In 2010 approximately 480,000 African Americans lived in the Bay Area's nine counties, comprising 6.7 percent of total populations. In terms of educational attainment 77 percent of the African-American population completed high school, 16.3 percent completed college and 5.4 percent completed graduate or professional degrees. Homeownership rates were just over one third of the African-American households, as compared to just over two thirds of white



households (California Legislative Black Caucus. 2011). The median household income for African Americans in the nine counties was \$48,000. The lowest median household incomes were in San Francisco and Alameda Counties and these were the two counties with the largest percentage decrease in their respective African-American populations since the 2000 census. Conversely, the two counties with the highest median household incomes, Solano and Sonoma, experienced the greatest increase in their African-American populations (Williams et al. 2010).

The Bay Area is not exceptional for its declining African-American population. Indeed, it represents a trend that is happening to African Americans, particularly those that are in the middle class, across the United States. This out-migration of African Americans from cities to suburbs is happening in U.S. cities such as Detroit, Chicago and New York with related increases in the suburbs of many of these cities. African Americans, like other racial groups have left urban centers for more affordable housing and in search of better schools and safe communities in which to raise their children. Indeed, recent Census data shows that slightly more than half of African Americans are now living in the suburbs of metropolitan areas rather than the urban center (Frey 2011).

In its dual focus on the city and suburban areas within the Bay Area, this study differs from previous research on African-American middle-class populations which have largely concentrated on central cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago and DC, but it is also in line with what African-Americans, particularly those in the middle class, are currently experiencing more generally in the United States. In addition, because of the increasing dispersion of members of the African-American middle class in the Bay Area, it is possible that those who want to create certain types of communities must be more deliberate and explicit in both their orientations and their actions.

Given the increasing out-migration of African-American residents, particularly those that are middle-class, to outlying suburbs and other regions, it is not surprising that accessing other African-American middle-class families and communities did not come easily to the mothers I interviewed. Mothers who desired connections with similarly middle-class African-American mothers but were unable to create them expressed a sense of isolation. This isolation seemed to be produced by several factors. The majority of mothers I interviewed either lived in primarily non-black middle-class communities, or primarily black lower income communities. Many of the mothers I interviewed had become estranged from religious communities or organizations in which they were raised. While many had grown up attending African American churches, as adults they stopped attending church. Several mothers noted that by not going to church they were potentially giving up the ability to have regular contact with African Americans in their communities. The mothers I interviewed who felt they had access to an African-American community that reflected their values described either attending a church or a membership within predominantly African-American parents or social organizations. Because many African-American mothers did not have ready access to other African-American middle-class mothers and families they described the additional work they put into finding like-minded African-American mothers and children with whom they and their children could socialize. I will revisit this concern related to racially and class specific community building in Chapter 4.



## Methods

To investigate the importance of dominant ideologies related to the family, work and parenting I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with sixty African-American middle and upper-middle-class mothers and several leaders of African-American mothers' groups in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through these interviews I examined the ideologies of motherhood that influence African-American middle-class mothers' day-to-day decisions about family and work and parenting. I chose semi-structured interviews as my data collection method because I wanted to examine the extent to which existing theories adequately captured the experiences of African-American middle-class mothers. Informed by both Michael Burawoy's (1998) extended case method and Glasser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory, I used African-American middle-class mothers as a case that permits both a revision of existing theory and the construction of alternative theories of motherhood and parenting. Using this approach I was able to identify additional dimensions that influence African-American middle-class mothers' decision related to work, family and parenting. I was also able to outline the key characteristics of an alternative ideology of mother.

I interviewed these mothers about their paths to motherhood, the sorts of support they had in their lives as mothers, their decisions related to working after having children and how they conceptualized their responsibilities as mothers. I also asked these mothers about how they approached parenting their children and what their key parenting concerns were. These interviews were one to two and half hours in length and were completed between June 2009 and September 2011. Prior to being interviewed, each participant was asked to fill out a Demographic Information Sheet that included questions about their marital status, education attainment, individual and household incomes, family composition and the racial identity of their parents. **Table 1.3** below describes the characteristics of the sample of mothers included in this research.

**Table 1.3**  
**Sample Characteristics**

Marital Status		
	Married / Domestic Partner	73%
	Divorced/ Never Married/Separated	27%
Age		
	Range	25years -45years
Education		
	Some College	8%
	College	35%
	Advanced Degree	57%
Income		
	50K-99K	27%
	100K-149K	23%
	150K-199K	23%
	200K-300K	27%
Homeowner		
	Yes	50%
	No	50%



In this research middle-class status was determined through a combination of educational attainment and total family income. Mothers had a minimum of a two-year college education and a total family income ranging from \$50,000 to \$300,000. Participants were similarly distributed along four income brackets. In the San Francisco Bay Area, median home prices during this time frame ranged from a low of \$290,000 in the first quarter of 2007 to a high of \$575,000 in 2010 (<http://www.sfced.org/case-for-business/quickfacts/2010-quickfacts/february>). While the income range is high by national standards, if we take seriously the notion of potential homeownership as a significant marker of middle-class status, those at the upper end of this income range would be among the few in the San Francisco Bay Area that could easily attain that marker of middle-class status. Half of the participants were homeowners and half were renters.

To recruit a range of mothers with different educational and income levels, I used a modified snowball sample, and I contacted mainstream and African-American professional organizations and women and mothers' organizations. I also contacted churches, hair salons, community colleges, local unions and sororities and posted announcements about the research on listservs catering to parents, mothers and African-American mothers. All mothers in my sample had a least one child under the age of ten and their employment status included working full-time, part-time or staying at home. The mothers had an average of two children and the ages of the women ranged from twenty-five to forty-five. The majority of participants had earned a college degree or greater. Several respondents had only attended some college, either earning an associate's degree or leaving a four-year program without conferral of a degree. Two thirds of the participants were currently married and the remaining participants were divorced, never married or widowed.

Based on the limited existing research on African-American middle-class mothers and my goal to investigate theories related to middle-class motherhood and parenting, I chose semi-structured interviews as my data collection method. By using semi-structured interviews I was able to maintain a consistent set of questions and topics with each mother while also allowing some flexibility for each mother to explore topics of her choosing. As Charles Ragin (2000) has argued, the strength of the case study is its ability to permit the researcher to explore the uncovered diversity present within groups that are often construed as primarily homogeneous in nature. Through this research I explored the shared and divergent experiences of African-American middle-class mothers. While this research cannot be generalized to all African-American middle-class mothers, it begins to uncover both the consistencies and the variations in the ways these mothers think about and make decisions related to family, work and parenting. In addition, by bringing in extant literature I examine how these mothers' beliefs and experiences converge or diverge with those of white middle-class mothers and denaturalize normative reference points set by that body of scholarship.

### *Insider/Outsider Status*

As an interviewer I shared certain traits with my participants. I am an African-American woman, a mother and I am also middle class. Some of these characteristics were more immediately visible than others. Before beginning these interviews I made the decision that I



would not offer that I was a mother but would answer honestly whenever the question was asked while quickly redirecting the focus back to the person I was interviewing. These shared background characteristics facilitated building rapport and provided an environment in which people seemed willing to share intimate details of their lives. These shared background characteristics also required that I remain vigilant in not taking for granted that I understood a participant's meanings. For example, an interviewee might say, "Well you know how they treat us" or "You're a mom so you know how it is." I responded with some variation of "I think I know what you mean but could you explain just so I'm sure/not making any assumptions." In this way I tried to continue building rapport but also resisted making assumptions about shared understandings. I used a similar approach when mothers assumed understandings based on other shared identity traits.

Unlike questions about race, gender and motherhood, class differences were more challenging to discuss. While many mothers easily revealed their opinions about African-Americans who were from lower and higher socioeconomic class backgrounds, others exhibited initial discomfort when class differences were the topic of discussion. This discomfort manifested itself in changes in body language, long pauses between comments, or attempts to reframe the question. In general, I attempted to put people at ease by saying some version of, "I realize talking about class can sometimes feel uncomfortable. I'd really appreciate hearing your thoughts." More often than not, simply verbally recognizing that discomfort enabled participants to move on from it and share their thoughts more freely. As a researcher this challenge related to discussing class underscored two things for me. First, no magical configuration of shared or divergent characteristics best supports uncovering the most "accurate" depictions of the lived experience. The research process demands we attend to the strengths and challenges associated with our own standpoint. Second, the research process also demands that we gently attend to uncovering the information contained within the pursed lips, the stiffened back, the wringing hands and the extended silences.

Through the interviews I conducted with African-American middle-class mothers the contours of the *"Integrated Mothering Ideology"* emerged. These mothers articulated a different set of assumptions about the experiences of idealized motherhood that informed their choices about work and family. This ideology included different assumptions related to the organization of childcare and family, to the relationship between paid work and motherhood and to concerns about and approaches to parenting than those discussed in the work-life scholarship discussed above. These interviews revealed how and why African-American middle-class mothers sought to construct and preserve specific versions of motherhood that were shaped by different cultural expectations of what it means to be a good mother. In the next section I provide a general road map of the dissertation and outline my central argument about how racial identity, class and gender influence these African-American middle-class mothers, and all mothers, experiences and beliefs related to work, family and parenting.

## **The Road Map**

In Chapter 2, "Extended Mothering," I lay out the first prong of the Integrated Mothering Ideology- mother centered, but extended family and community supported childcare. By and large the mothers that I interviewed utilized their extended family and community to assist them



with raising their children. Their preference for kin-care was both related to the extended family networks that they had access to and valued, and to a desire to provide care-giving environments for their children that were free from racial discrimination. While one might assume the use of kin-care is connected to a mother's access to material resources and options, my interview data suggest that African-American middle-class mothers' use of kin care was also tied to non-material motivations.

In Chapter 3, "Integrated Devotions" I examine the second prong of the Integrated Mothering Ideology- working is a duty of mothers. I begin with a brief history of how the cult of domesticity and the separate sphere ideologies have shaped practices of motherhood, the workplace and informed government policies. These ideologies produce what I refer to as a *market/family nexus of conflict* when mothers choose to combine working outside of the home with raising children. African-American mothers overall have largely been excluded from the scope of these ideologies and their related practices. I propose that African-American middle-class mothers' different history of labor force participation combined with their exclusion from dominant ideologies of motherhood and womanhood has produced a different *market/family nexus of integration*- the integration of motherhood with working outside of the home.

In Chapter 4, "Racial Cultivation," I describe the third and final prong of the Integrated Mothering Ideology- that mothers consistently consider issues related to racial identity and racism when making parenting decisions with the aim towards developing their children's racial comfort, racial and class identity, and acumen in interracial and intra-racial interactions. While class is assumed to trump the importance of racial identity in decisions related to parenting (Lareau 2003), my research illustrates that for African-American middle-class mothers, concerted cultivation is as much about cultivating a specific version of racial identity as it is about concerting a specific version of class identity. Thus, rather than being an added concern that is occasionally activated for mothers, the African-American middle-class mothers that I interviewed described the persistence and continuity of concerns related to racial identity and gender in their everyday decisions and practices as parents.

In Chapter 5, "Integrated Mothering- An Alternative Ideology of Mothering and Parenting," I conclude by synthesizing the three components of the *Integrated Mothering Ideology* and their related departures from current assumptions related to family, work and parenting. I do this by highlighting several contemporary news stories that underscore the different approaches and concerns of African-American middle-class mothers related to work, family and parenting. This alternative ideology emerged from my interviews with African-American middle-class mothers and it is accompanied by different assumptions and orientations to childcare, work and family and parenting. The Integrated Mothering Ideology assumes that while childrearing remains a significant duty of mothers, the responsibility for caring for children is shared with and supported by spouses, extended family and community. It rejects a competing spheres framework and instead assumes that, while mothers certainly experienced challenges in managing the demands of work and family, working outside of the home is a normal and natural part of being a mother. It also assumes that mothers approach parenting in a racially, class and gender conscious manner. Indeed concerns related to racial identity and gender do not function as mere additions to the parenting concerns of mothers but are, instead, continually considered in their quotidian parental decision-making. Comparing the dominant assumptions within family



and work life research with those of the Integrated Mothering Ideology demonstrates how intersections of racial identity, class and gender produce different social realities and cultural prerogatives, not just for African-American middle-class mothers, but for mothers from all racial and class backgrounds.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Cultural Distinctions in Motherhood: Extended Family Mothering in Contemporary Black Middle-class Lives**

In November 2008 Senator Barack Obama became the first African American to be elected as the president of the United States. On January 20, 2009 when the newly inaugurated President Obama moved into the White House, he replaced the nuclear First Family living there with an extended one. President Obama was accompanied not only by his wife and two daughters, but also his mother-in-law –Marion Robinson. While this decision seemed to generate surprise among some people, provided fodder for comedy routines (Toppos 2008; Jay Leno May 2, 2010 White House Correspondence Dinner) and sparked an array of media outlets to proffer advice on how Barack Obama could best cohabitate with his in-law (Spivack 2009; Petty 2009), for the vast majority of African Americans his decision did not raise an eyebrow. Throughout the presidential campaign Michelle Obama acknowledged the pivotal role that her mother and a network of other women in her life played in helping to keep her daughters grounded and on the right track in school and in life (Bellandi 2008). When Michelle Obama was asked by Newsweek in 2009 why she and President Obama decided to ask her mother to join them in the White House and help raise their children she said, "The girls are going to need her, as part of their sense of stability... And what is true for my mom is that she does anything for us and her grandkids." For Michelle Obama the natural choice was to ask her mother to support her while raising her children, particularly during what would be a challenging transition to White House life. While research suggests that upwardly mobile white mothers tend to have weaker ties to their mothers and extended families, like other upwardly mobile African-American women (Higginbotham and Weber 1992), Michelle Obama's mother served as resource and supported her while she managed a demanding two-career household and a presidential campaign. Michelle Obama was raised in an extended family context and saw this as the preferred approach to childrearing. In addition, from Michelle Obama's perspective, her children's grandmother saw helping to raise them as one of her responsibilities.

In a different interview published in Oprah Magazine, Michelle Obama underscored her belief in the need to have communities support families, instead of defining family in narrow and independent nuclear terms. She described this perspective thus:

[Once we] lived in small enough communities where people could help each other. Families were together. That's how I grew up. My grandmother lived around the corner, my grandfather lived two blocks away, they each lived with aunts and uncles. My paternal grandparents lived maybe ten blocks away. It was rare to see a family where one person was trying to cook, clean, watch the kids, do it all. You always had a community. But nowadays people have to move away from their community just to find a job. And then they're leaving their support base. So we have to acknowledge that that's going on and ask what it does to the family structure and what it means in terms of how we have to reengineer support. (Michelle Obama, interview in Oprah Magazine April 2009).

Whether Michelle Obama ever used a paid childcare provider or not, her preferred family form was not what is viewed as the normative self-sufficient nuclear family that was popularized during the time in which she was raised. Instead, she preferred an extended family form with a



network of kin to support each other, and specifically mothers, in caring for their children. Harkening back to her youth, a time frame when the nuclear family was gaining a foothold as the ideal family form in America, Michelle Obama identified a different organization within her own family and in the working and middle-class African-American community she was raised in on the south side of Chicago. In this organization of the family, mothers were not private islands trying to accomplish all household and childrearing tasks on their own. Instead, like the mothers in Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (1974), they were embedded in intricate networks of support that enabled them to get the job of raising children and caring for their families accomplished, usually while working outside of the home.

According to research on the use of kin-care and multigenerational families within the African-American community, Michelle Obama's perspective on the extended family and her decision to ask her mother to accompany her to the White House is not surprising. African-American families have historically demonstrated a strong extended family orientation, have heavily utilized their extended family members to provide childcare for their families and are more likely to be multigenerational than white households (Taylor, Passel, Fry, Morin, Wang, Velasco and Dockterman 2010). Michelle Obama's decision to use kin-care is also not surprising given her status as an upwardly mobile African-American woman. Research suggest that African-American middle-class women who have attained that status through socioeconomic mobility are more likely to have close relationships with their mothers and heavily utilize kin and community networks for instrumental support than there white counterparts (Higginbotham and Weber 1992). While recent research conducted by Brewster and Padavic (2002) has provided evidence that within the African-American community the use of kin-care is decreasing among lower income families, this has not been the case for African-American middle-class families where the use of kin-care has increased. Brewster and Padavic's (2002) scholarship has primarily focused on structural explanations to account for both the decreasing use of kin-care among lower-income African Americans and the continued use of kin-care among African Americans with larger incomes. On the one hand the decreasing use of kin-care among lower income African Americans has been explained by expanding employment opportunities in the formal labor force to women of color who have traditionally been the sources of kin-care. On the other hand, the continuing attachment to kin-care among African-American families with larger incomes has been attributed to these families' choosing to use their resources to employ relatives and provide them with better incomes and working conditions than they could otherwise obtain (Brewer and Padavic 2002).

Michelle Obama's decision to ask her mother to help her care for her children conformed to the expectations and experiences that many of the African-American middle-class mothers in my study had about who would care for their children in their absence. Among the mothers I interviewed grandmothers or a close, typically female, relative or community member with whom they had a longstanding relationship were the preferred sources of childcare. Rebecca relayed her perception of the different preferences of African American versus white mothers regarding childcare, stating

I think in our culture we tend to be more like your grandmother will watch you or your cousin whereas in white culture it is typically the nanny. And that is obviously a financial issue but I don't think it is necessarily always a financial issue. Michelle Obama is the



perfect example, she doesn't have a nanny, it's her mom. And that is just how that is going to work. You know. We just are more, and have always been as a culture I think, that we take care of our children. You know, we are going to get someone close to us to take care of our children. So in the white middle class, I just think that it is different. I think it is a cultural difference. It has turned into a financial difference as we have garnered more and gained more money and all those things. Not saying that African-American women don't have nannies. But I think typically even if you look at those reality shows with the white women it's the nannies, with the black women it's grandma. (2011).

Rebecca believed that even when finances were not an issue, often a different choice was made. Rather than seeking out the expert care of a "Super Nanny" like figure who would carry out the directives of mothers, the majority of African-American middle-class mothers that I interviewed were comforted by having their children be cared for by a relative. Together Michelle Obama and Rebecca's quotes illustrate critiques of four different sets of cultural expectations that influence how mothers and families arrange childcare for their children. The first cultural expectation is related to a mother's orientation to family form- nuclear versus extended. The second cultural expectation is the view that childcare is best undertaken as the primary and, largely, exclusive duty of mothers rather than an activity that is shared by multiple family and community members. Related to this expectation is that a mother must master expert knowledge contained within contemporary parenting advice books in order to be a "good mother." The third cultural expectation focuses on how and why parents select non-maternal care for their children. The fourth cultural expectation is that working mothers can only justify their decision to work through improvements to their performance in the private sphere as mothers rather than a preference for their private sphere responsibilities.

Using the case of African-American middle-class mothers I argue that a mothers' orientation to the primacy of expert-guided and mother-centered childcare within a nuclear, independent family context versus her orientation to wisdom or experience-guided and family and community-supported childcare within an extended and interdependent family context influences her decisions and feelings about childcare. Existing research has often viewed the preference for extended family support as a necessary modification to the traditional nuclear family unit when human or economic resources are not available (Hays 1999; Blair-Loy 2003). While structural explanations are often the primary explanations given for African-American mothers' different behaviors related to childcare and family form (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004; Chetiji and Hamilton 2001), I argue that cultural explanations also matter and, often, cannot be neatly disentangled from structural explanations. Rather, cultural and structural explanations co-constitute each other.

These different orientations to the extended family and kin care represent one of three core elements of a different ideology of motherhood- the *Integrated Mothering* ideology. This ideology does not embrace the tenets of the exclusive or Intensive Mothering ideology. Instead it views raising children as an endeavor that is best accomplished with the instrumental and emotional support of one's extended family and community. Rather than seeking assistance from extended kin and community in order to make do when circumstances make achieving the intensive mothering ideal challenging, the mothers in my study viewed extended family



connections as an important part of their children's lives. In addition, while some mothers in my sample viewed raising their children as an expert-guided endeavor and viewed older mothers as sources of outdated information, the majority of mothers said they most valued and primarily relied upon the "expertise" gained from the experiential wisdom of mothers in their families and communities. When extended family members were not available to assist with childcare mothers generally sought out market-care from individuals from culturally similar backgrounds with the hopes that these caregivers would view their children as family and shield them from early experiences of racial mistreatment. Often these caregivers were found *within* these mothers existing social networks. Those mothers that chose culturally different caregivers typically viewed these individuals as sources of specific skills for their children but these mothers were often wary of the potential racial biases that these culturally different caregivers might expose to their children.

### **Family Formation and Mothering Approaches Revisited**

In *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Sharon Hays (1999:8) asserts that the Intensive Mothering ideology "is the dominant ideology of socially appropriate childrearing in the United States." Hays (1999:8) argues, "appropriate childrearing is child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive." She goes on to state "[t]here is an assumption that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture by a single primary caretaker and that the mother is the best person for the job (Hay: 8)." While Hays (1999) acknowledges that not all mothers are able to actualize the practices related to *Intensive Mothering* she claims all mothers adjudicate their decisions about work and family in relationship to this ideology. Hays' assertion, that Intensive Mothering influences most mothers' decisions related to work and family issues, has gained wide ranging acceptance in work and family scholarship, particularly in the U.S. context (Blair-Loy 2003; MacDonald 1998; Segura 1994). In addition, according to Hays (1999), while mothers may consult their own mothers and friends for advice they feel compelled to absorb the advice from the latest parenting books as their primary guide for how to best raise their children. Indeed parenting books are the resources the mothers in Hays' research highlight most frequently as sources of advice.

When mothers do not stay-at-home and serve as the primary caregivers to their children Hays (1999) argues that this does not mean they stop embracing the practices related to Intensive Mothering. Instead these mothers are expected to embody the archetype of the super-mom who can maintain a successful career while still remaining child focused. These mothers shift from being the providers, to the coordinators of Intensive Mothering practices. Cameron MacDonald (1998) has described how working mothers become the managers of care and thus seek out caregivers that can do their "shadow work" - the daily tasks associated with motherhood. These caregivers implement the parenting approaches that mothers decide upon after a careful study of guidance from contemporary parenting experts. The goal is that, even in their absence, mothers can be assured that their children are being parented according to the "best" Intensive Mothering approaches. While these caregivers must necessarily forge emotional bonds with the children under their care, they must walk a tightrope of doing the "shadow work" of mothers while not displacing the affections of children towards their mothers (MacDonald 1998). In addition, when explain their decision to work outside of home, Hays (1999) asserts that these mothers must focus on how paid employment improves their identity as a mother rather than their distaste for



the daily activities associated with childrearing or their preferences for the duties related to their public sphere employer.

While racial and class boundaries are rarely crossed in the United States, within the arena of childcare, interracial interactions continue to be frequent (Wrigley 1995; Rollins 1985). For example, historically white middle-class families have often employed women of color to care for their children and complete household tasks (Glenn 1991; Rollins 1985; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). In Julia Wrigley's (1995) research focusing on the relationships between upper middle-class families and their childcare providers, she uncovered that these boundaries of racial identity and class were crossed and maintained with different aims in mind. When mothers chose a culturally similar caregiver they gave them more autonomy, viewed these caregivers as instrumental in helping to socialize their children into a middle-class lifestyle, assigned these caregivers the primary duty of childcare and efforts were made to incorporate these caregivers into their families (Wrigley 1995). When culturally dissimilar caregivers were chosen mothers gave them less autonomy, childcare was viewed as an unskilled task, these caregivers were often burdened with additional duties beyond caring for children and less effort was made to incorporate them into their families (Wrigley 1995). Thus while caregivers were hired to care for children their level of integration into the employers family was highly contingent on configurations of racial identity, class and gender. In coming to this conclusion about the significance of the cultural similarity or difference of caregivers, it is important to note that Wrigley's (1995) study primarily focused on white, middle and upper-middle-class mothers. These mothers' views of the advantages or disadvantages of cultural similarity or cultural difference were influenced by their specific position within the racial and economic hierarchy. Mothers not sharing a, typically, upper middle-class white perspective, may experience these power differentials differently and may have different concerns related to the cultural similarity or difference of their child's caregiver.

In addition to being built upon a particular practice of motherhood, the ideology of intensive mothering also assumes a particular family formation- an autonomous and independent nuclear family, comprised of a heterosexual married couple with children (Hays 1999). Within sociology, the nuclear family is a major focus of research on family and work life issues and it is presented as the normative and idealized organization of the family (Coontz 2000; Smith 1994; Sennett 1970; Hays 1999; Parsons 1955). Traditionally in nuclear families the primary duty of a father is to financially provide for their families and the primary duty of a mother is to care for children. In this rendition of the family, it can be envisioned as a single celled organism that may share a living environment with others but is essentially reliant on its sole efforts for survival. Talcott Parsons (1955), who coined the term nuclear family, saw men as having an instrumental role in the labor force and women as having an expressive role in the home. Parsons (1955) viewed this division of labor as natural and as helping the family function efficiently. The independent nuclear family is viewed as the building block of family relations in modern capitalist societies (Smith 1994; Parsons 1955).

When families do not conform to the nuclear form they are often viewed through the lenses of cultural difference/deficit and/or structural accommodation (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004). Indeed research has examined how diverging from the nuclear family form of a male primary breadwinner and female caregiver is a source of economic inequality for individuals and



their families (McClanahan and Percheski 2008). For example, research examining the life experiences of single mothers often focuses on how these mothers and their children encounter challenges and suffer consequences for not conforming to the nuclear family form. These mothers are often viewed as embracing their extended family to gain additional support that they lack because their family does not conform to the norm of the nuclear family (Stack 1974; Blum and Deussen 1996). Thus, using extended and community networks as a source of support is assumed to be an accommodation when families are not able to care for themselves independently rather than something that is independently valued.

Scholarship on middle and upper-middle-class mothers' approaches to childcare has presented a racially skewed picture of mothers' beliefs and practices related to work, family and parenting. This skew has been caused by a profoundly white and middle class bias in the research subjects that have been studied. In *Cultural Contractions of Motherhood*, while attempting to have a racially and economically diverse sample, out of a total of thirty-eight interview participants Sharon Hays included a total of two African-American mothers. Kathleen Gerson's (1985) *Hard Choices* is based on interviews with a completely white sample of mothers. In Cameron MacDonald's research (1998) two-thirds of her sample were white women. In Mary Blair-Loy's (2003) *Competing Devotions* out of fifty-eight mothers interviewed, a grand total of one African-American mother was included, and the remainder of the sample was white. Nonetheless, based on a limited number of interviews that included few, if any, mothers of color, these researchers suggest that all mothers are negotiating in relationship to similar cultural expectations of motherhood regardless of their racial and ethnic group affiliation and class backgrounds. Similar skews exist in quantitative research designs which, at times, exclude mothers of color all together (Hock, Gnezda and McBride 1984; Volling and Belsky 1993; Shuster 1997) or include too few mothers of color to analyze any group across intersections of both class and racial identity.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) began to disrupt the view that women from different racial and class backgrounds experienced motherhood in the same way in *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins did this by presenting a theoretical framework of African-American women's different experiences and perspectives. She argued that African-American communities have "recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers- women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities- traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (Collins 2000:178)." Indeed, historically African-American families have used othermothers to assist and support them in raising their children. Collins also notes that while African-American mothers share certain experiences and are faced with similar challenges there is diversity in how they respond to these experiences and challenges. Indeed as the opportunities for African-Americans more generally have expanded, African-American mothers' current and historical social class positions are becoming increasingly diverse which influences their responses.

Additionally, while the nuclear family has indeed placed its stamp on how a variety of institutions within society think about the family (Smith 1994), it is not as longstanding a building block of society as one might assume. Stephanie Coontz (2000) has shown that the nuclear family that we often associate with various sitcoms from the 1950s and 1960s such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* only became possible during that era. Soon after this



family form emerged the autonomous nuclear family form became harder and harder to attain (Coontz 2000). In addition, as the nuclear family made its rise to dominance in society, several new and complementary views of relationships within the family emerged during this period to support and encourage its dominance. Children were now expected to leave home and form independent families when they became adults. Adult children were not encouraged to care for their elderly parents but instead they were encouraged to place them in institutional settings such as nursing homes or assisted living accommodations (Coontz 2000). In line with the ideals of American individualism, grandparents were encouraged to accept institutional living and not become a burden to their children and their families (Coontz 2000). In this new era grandparents were entitled to have second lives of leisure in retirement that began after raising children. This was a period when grandparents were supposed to exercise newly reclaimed independence as empty nesters (Coontz 2000). In short, creating the nuclear family form required shifting views of the family from a range of perspectives related to who makes up one's immediate family and the duties and obligations that are owed to members within that group.

Despite the increasing numbers of nuclear families and the aspirations of many to conform to this ideal, research has shown that the extended family and kin networks continue to play, and are increasingly playing an important role in helping families balance the competing demands of working outside of the home and raising children (Sarkisian, Gerena and Gerstel 2007; Lee and Aytac 1998). Indeed, while the nuclear family form has historically been presented as an adaptation to advanced modern society, research suggests that, families that continued to utilize extended family networks during the industrial revolution fared better economically than their nuclear family counterparts (Sennett 1970). Thus, arguably, extended family forms are better suited for managing the work and family challenges prevalent in modern society.

Scholars have also underscored that African Americans have historically been, and continue to be, more likely to be a part of multigenerational households. According to data from the report "The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household (Taylor, Passel, Fry, Morin, Wang, Velasco and Dockterman 2010)" twenty-three percent of African Americans live in multigenerational households and that percentage did not significantly differ from the rate of African Americans living in multigenerational households in 1980. While some scholars have identified potential cultural explanations for this, most have focused on structural explanations for African-Americans' historical and continuing connections to their extended family members and kin-care. This is because kin and community care is often viewed as an adaptation that has occurred in the face of structural constraints like lower incomes and female-headed households (Stacks 1974; Wilson 1987; Anderson 1990). After all, African-American mothers' access to extended family and community networks for childcare enabled them to work outside of the home (Collins 2000; Stacks 1974; Jones 1985). Less frequently the use of extended family care has been analyzed as a function of cultural preferences (Uttal 1999; Hill and Sprague 1999; McAdoo 1980).

While extended family and community networks have been identified as particularly important among racial and ethnic minorities, recent scholarship suggests that white middle-class families may also be using extended family networks to address the contemporary demands of work and family (Hansen 2011; Taylor, Passel, Fry, Morin, Wang, Velasco and Dockterman



2010; Taylor, Kochhar, Cohn, Passel, Velasco, Motel and Patten 2011). While not reaching the rates of other ethnic minorities the number of white multigenerational families has increased from 1980 to 2008 (Taylor, Passel, Fry, Morin, Wang, Velasco and Dockterman 2010). However, white families utilizing these networks for childcare support have been construed as having to reconcile the ideal that their families should be autonomous and self-sufficient entities with the very interdependent lives that they must lead (Hansen 2011). In addition to leaning on extended family for support, research has shown that grandparents are also increasingly taking on the role of the primary caregivers for their grandchildren, particularly within the African-American community, (Taylor, Passel, Fry, Morin, Wang, Velasco and Dockterman 2010, Mutchler, Lee and Baker 2006; Fuller-Thomson, Minkler and Driver 1997). Overall, this research shows that increasingly families from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds are recognizing the importance of reclaiming, retaining and creating extended family networks to assist them in raising children and caring for other family members while simultaneously meeting the demands of their lives in the public sphere. This data also shows that ties to the extended family have been a continuous characteristic of many African-American families (Taylor, Passel, Fry, Morin, Wang, Velasco and Dockterman 2010).

In the remainder of this chapter I investigate how African-American middle-class mothers approach raising their children and configuring their families. I argue that while the nuclear family is presented as the dominant and preferred family form, among African-American middle-class mothers there is a strong orientation toward maintaining, protecting and/or creating extended family and community networks. This model of the family was something that these mothers grew up with and has influenced their choices about family and childcare as mothers. I also examine how the expectations and experiences derived from these mothers' families and communities influence where they get advice about childrearing, how they select childcare and what they view as the benefits and detractions of the forms of childcare and family connections they currently maintain. Lastly, I examine how mothers explain their decisions to work outside of the home and be stay-at-home mothers.

### **Growing up with Kin Care and Retaining Extended Family Connections**

Whether they were raised in two parents households or households headed by a single mother, most mothers in my sample described being raised in families in which extended family was a regular part of their lives. The practice of looking to members of one's extended family and community networks to assist with childcare was something the mothers in my sample directly benefited from during their childhood. Tamika, a married, stay at home, mother of one, described a variety of childcare arrangements that supported her mother's ability to work outside of the home. Responding to a question about how her parents coordinated childcare Tamika said:

My grandmother lived with us for a while, my dad's mom ...and then we moved out of San Francisco and we had a baby sitter for a little while. Right around the time the baby sitter stopped working out my sisters were old enough to look after me. Then my mom started working the swing shift so she would be there after we got home from school but then we needed to be quiet so she could get ready for work (2009).



Tamika mother's choices regarding childcare represented a mix of kin, community and self-care. For part of her life she lived in a multigenerational household in which her grandmother helped her parents manage work and family demands. Once she and her siblings reached a certain age it was then expected that they would begin to look after younger siblings and relatives. Similarly Hana, a married, stay-at-home mother of two sons, lived with her paternal grandmother and also described a mix of community childcare arrangements. Describing her siblings' childcare arrangements Hana said:

In certain situations my sister would go to the school daycare wherever [my mother] was teaching and then other times she would use a local daycare provider that might be local to her school or local to the neighborhood. We used different ones throughout her career... One of them was a woman who lived across the street from the block my father grew up on and she was the neighborhood daycare person. Everybody knew her and my uncle was dating her daughter so you know there were a few of those, that is Miss so and so, we have known her for forever and a day (2009).

Like Tamika and Hana, many of the mothers I interviewed grew up in families in which extended family members such as grandparents, aunt, uncles and cousins figured prominently in their daily lives. Living for periods of time with a grandparent or regularly spending portions of the year living with grandparents was a common experience for these mothers. When non-family childcare was utilized mothers often already knew the caregiver from their community.

For many of the mothers in my sample, the village approach to raising children did not represent a depiction of family organization and childcare that was recovered by Hillary Clinton and presented to them as an African tradition they should emulate and to which to aspire.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the majority of mothers in my research experienced some form of this village approach concretely in their daily lives as children. For example, Jennifer, a single working mother of one son, described how her own mother used a network of reciprocal childcare between community members to address her childcare needs. Jennifer said:

When we were really little, like in the 70s, my mom friends, everybody took care of each other kids. We lived in Richmond and there was a lady there who would take care of a lot of the kids. So there was her and then we had a friend of the family who lived with us for a period of time who took care of me. [My mother] would have lots of friends work with each other to try to take care of the kids. So if it wasn't my mom watching the kids it was her friends or somebody (2009).

Rather than describing mothering as a solitary activity between mother and child, Jennifer described a community in which mothering was a shared activity. Through her life experiences Jennifer learned that mothers were connected to each other and were a continuous and routine part of each other's lives. These mothers learned from one another, supported one another and adopted a version of motherhood that involved shared childcare.

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<sup>2</sup> *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* written by Hillary Rodham Clinton, was published in 1996. The books' title is said to be derived from an African Proverb and highlights a sentiment that has been expressed in a variety African nations that raising children is not just the project of a single family but of the community.



Similarly describing what her childhood was like Cara, a married, working mother of two said:

I grew up around lots of family, lots of uncles and cousins, so everybody just watched out for everybody else, and you know, you would spend a lot of time at your relatives. I remember my grandparents watching me when I was a kid, like when my mom had to work, or when she and my dad would go out. Those were fond memories of spending the night with my grandparents. You know, spending a lot of time around different family members (2009).

Cara's quote also underscores the structural and cultural benefits of the extended family form. To be sure, having extended family available to provide low or no-cost childcare provided an economic benefit but Cara also identified how engaging with her extended family was a part of the rhythm of her family life. This rhythm focused on incorporating a broader set of relatives into the daily activities of families. Jennifer and Cara did not view growing up in an extended family context as unusual. They recalled this version of family organization fondly. Their relatives were not just called upon when assistance was needed or only present on special occasions or holidays. Instead these members had a consistent presence in these mothers' lives during the week and on weekends. While many white mothers from the same generation were raised within a nuclear family, these mothers were raised within an extended family form that they viewed as ideal.

In addition to community and kin-care from adults, these mothers also grew up in families in which older children provided childcare for younger siblings and relatives. Many described returning to an empty house after school and caring for themselves, and, sometimes, younger siblings until their parents returned from work in the evening. Mera, a stay-at-home mother of two, remembered that her mother addressed her childcare needs through a combination of these elements. She said, "My older brother would always watch me and I would often come home alone from age seven." Indeed from very early ages some of the mothers in my sample became responsible for picking siblings up from school, cooking dinner and putting them to bed. Most often they were not completely unsupervised, as nearby neighbors would check-in on them. Nonetheless, accomplishing a variety of household duties fell to them rather than an adult caregiver. While the mothers in my sample did not want to replicate these experiences for their own children these experiences of extended family and community involvement informed their parenting practices. Kin care and extended family connections were traditions that started early in their lives.

The strength of these mothers' community and extended family networks can also be seen in how their families at times stepped in to provide quasi-social welfare support to family and community members who were in need. Several of the mothers in my sample saw their own mothers serve as othermothers to children whose blood mothers were unable to do so. At times their parents informally fostered children from relatives or community members for short or long periods. Tracy, a married working mother of five, grew up in a large family and considered many members of her community to be as close to her as family. She described how her mother



despite having limited resources informally adopted children from the community whose parents were experiencing challenges related to finances or substance abuse. Tracy recounted,

I probably should use the word adopt but there were two girls in the neighborhood who were having problems with their mother. She was on drugs and the father was on drugs so we kind of took them in. They stayed with us from the ages of 15 and 13 on up until they were grown. [My mother] then went on to take on two more children whose mother was having some difficulties. But then after their mother was okay they went back with their mom. But we keep in contact with them (2009).

These sources of emergency childcare were found in the communities that these mothers lived in and potentially protected community children from becoming a part of the foster care system. Tracy's story highlights the benefits of having extended and community networks of care. For the mothers in my sample the extended family was not something that needed to be recovered in this generation of mothering. It was something that was an organic part of their upbringing and they viewed replicating it in their adult lives as a natural progression.

### **Extended Family and Community-Supported Childrearing**

Given that the mothers in my sample were often cared for by relatives it was an easy transition for them to look to their family and community for sources of childcare. Many of the mothers I interviewed viewed caring for their children as a mother-centered activity that would be supported by spouses, extended family and community members. This orientation was reflected in how mothers approached choosing childcare and in their decisions about routine, occasional or emergency childcare providers for their children. Fathers often played a key part in addressing family and work responsibilities. For example fathers often had routine times when they were responsible for doing pick up and drop off and were often the first people that married or partnered mothers utilized when unavoidable family and work conflicts emerged. A few fathers were stay-at-home dads either to extend the period of time their smaller children remained in parental care or they were the primary childcare provider for extended periods of time while their wives were the primary breadwinners. In addition, it was common for the mothers I interviewed to enlist or be offered their children's grandmothers assistance in caring for their children for extended periods of time.

For Sharon, Nora, Brandy and Hana, all married working mothers, the solution to managing demanding careers and young children was that their child's grandmother took on the responsibility of being their primary childcare provider when they returned to work. As a consequence these mothers were less stressed about the quality of care their children received and were not confined by the typical time constraints of childcare facilities that are generally not open late into the evening. When Sharon returned to work her daughter was 8 months old. In describing her feelings about returning to work she said,

It was fine because I had my mother taking care of her. How could I have thought I would have a nanny, someone I didn't know who wasn't even a part of my family [take care of my child]? It was just crazy that I would even think that could work, but before having kids that seemed perfectly reasonable. So my mother stepped in and we took her



to my mom's house every morning and then I went to work and picked her up and came home... My mother was very diligent I had no question about my child under my mothers care (2009).

While Sharon had the means to pay for a nanny or a formal daycare when she ultimately had to make the decision her preference was for childcare by her family. While this care certainly provided her with some pecuniary benefits she saw the primary benefits as providing her with sense of security about the quality of care her child received. Sharon ultimately had another child for whom her mother also provided childcare.

While the geographic proximity of grandmothers often facilitated these sorts of childcare arrangements, it was not unusual for grandmothers and other female relatives to temporarily move in with mothers increasing their availability. Occasionally grandmothers moved from out of state and across the country to care for their grandchildren for months or years at a time. This was the case for both Nora and Brandy. Nora's mother volunteered to provide childcare when she originally returned to work to quell concerns about having a non-family childcare provider. Nora also acknowledged that there were financial benefits of using her mother for childcare but this form of childcare also provided her with added peace of mind. Describing her choice of childcare Nora said,

I stayed home, full time for 3 or 4 months, and then my mother came out to NY, we sublet an apartment for her and she came out for 6 months, because I had to go back to work full time. So she became the grandma nanny full time for 6 months, which was fabulous...My mom would come at 9, and I would hand my daughter over I would go to work. And I thought, I would come home a lot during the day and nurse and stuff, but I actually didn't...So I would just pump at work, because I nursed her for a year. And I would come home at five or six most days ...some nights, it would be later and my husband would be there. But it was great. It worked out great. Actually, I was anticipating a lot of power struggles, and there were very very few (2009).

Similarly Brandy's mother also offered to care for her grandchildren. In this case, Brandy's mother ultimately sold her house and moved in with her and her husband to serve as the primary childcare provider for her grandchildren. Brandy recounted how when she returned to work she would check in with her mother to see how her sons were doing throughout the day and how this arrangement enabled her to have the flexibility to work the demanding hours her job often required of her.

Finally in Hana's case her child's paternal grandmother offered to look after her son when she returned to work. Hana's mother-in-law ran a daycare and she cared for her son free of charge. Hana described her choice of childcare and the impact it had on her stating:

My mother-in-law watches my son. My mother-in-law has a daycare and she lives in Berkeley. So she watches him for free and she does that and it is incredible. And, so I felt good, you know, that is a blessed thing. You know my mother-in-law, his grandmother is watching him, and I don't really have to worry about whatever. Not to say that it was drama free because she is not the easiest person to work with all the time but it was free



childcare with someone that we loved and we knew loved our baby. So that made a world of difference (2009).

Hana highlighted both the tangible and intangible benefits of having her mother-in-law care for her children. While this care provided a financial benefit, it also came from someone who loved her child and, thus, provided Hana with the security and peace of mind to return to work.

Except for Sharon, all of these mothers explicitly acknowledged that using kin-care as the principal source of childcare provided some sort of financial benefit. This was the case for most mothers that used kin-care. While it would be easy to reduce their choices to ones that were primarily influenced by structural or economic benefits, these mothers' descriptions demonstrate additional motivations. These motivations include increasing their peace of mind by choosing caregivers they viewed as the best option for childcare because of existing emotional attachments. The mothers I interviewed suggested that these offers to provide free or low cost childcare were readily made by grandmothers. For the most part, grandmothers' aptitudes at parenting were viewed positively and as a valuable resource. These mothers felt confident about the care their children were receiving because the person caring for them was a trusted family member who loved them. By choosing grandmothers and other relatives to care for their children, these mothers had a high level of comfort in returning to careers with demanding schedules. This kin care also provided them with additional flexibility in terms of their work schedules.

The benefits mothers experienced from having grandparents care for their young children did not mean these arrangements came with no detractions. To be sure, the mothers in my sample had struggles with their children's grandmothers. Some mothers faced resistance from grandmothers because of their choice to breastfeed their children and others worked to reign in the amount of sugary snacks grandmothers dispensed when they cared for their children. Several mothers described a mix of benefits and challenges that these connections created for them. Teresa, a married working mother of two, indicated that her mother demanded she be the one that look after her grandchildren. While Teresa appreciated this arrangement she also described some of it downsides. She said,

It has its good days and bad days. Sometimes my daughter accidentally calls [her grandmother] mommy. They are so close to my mom they don't want me. Sometimes they want my mom. My mom spoils the kids and gives them whatever they want and it makes me mad because they didn't treat me like that. All and all it is a good thing. I don't have to worry about my kids because I know she is taking the best care of them and it just makes me feel better having her watch them (2009).

Teresa identified one of the key fears scholars suggest mothers have when letting someone else care for their children- that they will think of the caregiver as their mother. Despite the challenges that Teresa experienced related to feeling displaced as her children's mother and her concern about monitoring the level of grandparent indulgence, ultimately this was the form of childcare that made her feel most comfortable. Teresa was not alone in acknowledging the negative aspects associated with having strong extended family ties. Riana, a working, single mother of one son, also described both plus and minuses to having access to extended family.



After returning from Southern California to live in the Bay area Riana's mother took care of her son for six months before he was admitted into preschool. While Riana also had ties to extended family in Southern California, her visits with them were less frequent averaging two times a month. When she returned to the Bay Area she lived in closer proximity to family and they provided her with childcare assistant that she found particularly helpful as a single mother. For example, Riana's family helped with the pick-up and drop-off of her son at school and also provided her with some time to herself. Despite these benefits, Riana also underscored that choosing kin care and being close to her extended family involved personal costs. She said, "I think [living in] LA was better for me but being here is better for [my son]. He really blossomed within months of being here and being around cousins. He's talking more and he's more outgoing. For him it has been great so I look at it that way because it is a benefit for him. But for me it has been draining to be back." For these mothers having an extended family orientation to childcare meant prioritizing their children's need to have a connection to that family over their own need to have emotional and physical distance from their extended family members. Ultimately, despite the negative consequences associated with retaining and cultivating extended and community ties mothers, preferred this configuration of family. These mothers gained peace of mind and flexibility in their childcare schedules that provided them economic benefits but they were also continuing a cultural tradition that viewed family as a more expansive and extended framework. These ties helped their children retain connections to their racial community.

But not all mothers used family to help them with childcare. Their reasons for not using kin for care ranged from lacking access to such networks to viewing certain family members as unsuitable caregivers because of histories of depression, mental illness and drug and sexual abuse. Some mothers responded to this lack of family by trying to create networks of support while others embraced a more nuclear family form in their childcare arrangements. Elizabeth was an example of someone who did not have family nearby to provide occasional or regular childcare assistance but in response she endeavored to create such networks. She said:

We are transplants from the east coast so we don't have any family here. For a while my friend and I would switch off babysitting. I would take her kids and then she would take my son. Then it got to be too much because she had two and now she has three so it wasn't as balanced and it seemed that somehow I would take her kids more than she would take care my son but we did that for a awhile. And then we had a babysitter but she didn't bathe him and do something else that I had asked so I was done with her. Now there is a little girl across the street that has two siblings. She is eleven and the mom and I kind of talk, she's right across the street so sometimes she watches my son and the mom is right there or the dad to help out. She is going to watch my son this weekend so we can go on the date (2009).

Elizabeth's description of trying to build a new network of support underscores the benefits these networks provide to mothers of young children. Most of the individuals Elizabeth used for childcare were people that she regularly had interactions with in her social and community networks.



One might assume that stay-at-home mothers were more likely to reject kin-care but I did not find that to be the case. A striking finding of this research was that slightly more than half of the mothers who described themselves as stay at home mothers, actually worked the night shift to be home with their families during the day. Anita Garey (1995) encountered mothers like these who were attempting to reconcile cultural ideals of the “good mother” and the reality that their families needed their public sphere economic contributions (Garey 1995). As I describe in more detail in Chapter 3, the mothers in my sample that identified as stay-at-home mothers and were simultaneously engaged in substantial amounts of paid work were attempting to reconcile competing cultural expectations. On the one hand the mainstream community envisions good mothers as perpetually available to their children and, on the other hand, the African-American community envisions good mothers as self-sufficient caregivers who make economic contributors to their families. These mothers, while identifying as stay-at-home mothers, heavily relied on spouses, kin and long time community members to care for their children while they worked and while their children often slept.

### *Guided by the Wisdom of Experts and Othermothers*

An area of commonality between the mothers in my research and those described in *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (Hays 1999) was their desire to seek out advice about how to best care for their children. During the stressful period of new motherhood when these mothers were confronted by new situations on a seemingly daily basis they looked for maps to help guide them through this new and uncertain terrain. Indeed among the mothers I interviewed some closely fit the Intensive Mothering practice of consulting books for advice. For example, Tamika described how she sought out information from many different places. She said,

[I] got advice from everywhere. I was asking everybody... My mother is probably my most direct course. But my mother's solutions to everything since the beginning of time has been get a book. You want to know how to do something, I'm sure someone has written a book on it. Go find a book. So I just started accumulating books. Or if something comes up I will call her or I will call my sister-in-law and say are you familiar or have you ever heard of this? ...When I wanted to expand my reference I read everything from natural fertility and pregnancy to the *Girlfriend's Guide to Raising Your Daughter* to food cafe. I mean I have read everything from complications studies on age and fertility, race and mortality (2009).

Tamika consulted books and academic studies to guide her parenting. Her impetus to seek out this information was influenced by her mothers' approach to parenting –“to find a book.” Rather than reinventing the wheel, her mother advised her that based on her experience when encountering a new situation or challenge this was the time to reach for a parenting book or study. Tamika also valued the advice from other experienced mothers.

Similarly, Nora described how she consulted both other mothers and books when she had childrearing questions. Describing where she got advice Nora said,

“Definitely other mothers, I think with Autumn I did a lot more reading. I don't do much parenting reading now. So, with Autumn I read a lot of Dr. Sears's books, and I hate him



now, I really loathe him, I think he's horrible. It was the wrong book for us to be reading with that particular child. I can see why his attachment parenting stuff is good for other kids, but it wasn't good for us, and it really caused a lot of doubt... But I really think that at this point it's other women, other women with kids (2009)."

Nora's experiences showed an initial desire to follow the advice of professional parenting experts and then over time shifted towards privileging experiential knowledge. She started motherhood in a way that was consistent with Intensive Mothering practices. She read through various parenting books and settled on Dr. Sears- an advocate of attachment parenting- as her expert of choice. In many ways attachment parenting is closely aligned with the Intensive Mothering ideology. It demands an enormous commitment of time, physical, emotional and financial resources from mothers (Sears 2001). Parenting practices associated with attachment parenting include natural/low medical intervention childbirth, giving birth at home, stay-at-home parenting, co-sleeping, breastfeeding and wearing babies in slings for most of the day (Sears 2001). Over time Nora felt this approach did not suit the needs of her child or her family and she sought out the experiential wisdom of other mothers to guide her parenting decisions. Finally Karin, a married, stay-at-home mother of one, described her sources of advice,

"Well, I ask my mom but my mom is 60. So everything changes and also goes back to the way it was, but it also changes. So I read a lot. I read everything I can actually. I go to La Leche League for breastfeeding stuff and food stuff, and I read the conventional *What to Expect in the First Year* for the safest medical things. You know and then I have a couple of books about the educational philosophy I grew up in that are like crazy but I read them anyway because I really enjoyed being taught in that kind of environment (2009).

Karin's comment "I ask my mom but my mom is 60" is similar to the reticence of Hays' mothers in accepting advice from their mothers because they are wary that it no longer conforms to the best parenting practices. Each of these mothers described a variety of books and studies they consulted to determine how to best raise their children. This practice of seeking out expert advice is strongly associated with the views espoused by the Intensive Mothering ideology.

While mothers shared the concerns of those described in *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (Hays 1999), and some engaged in the related practices of immersing themselves in parenting books, a subtle difference in how these mothers approached this period was whose knowledge they privileged and sought out first. While Sharon Hays (1999) describes the Herculean efforts mother engaged in to master the latest advice in parenting books, many of the mothers I interviewed trusted and privileged the wisdom of other mothers' experiences. Thus, while the mothers I interviewed also consulted parenting books such as *What to Expect When You Are Expecting* (Murkoff 2008) and *What to Expect the First Year* (Murkoff 2009) and consulted parenting websites, the most frequent and highly valued sources of information were mothers in their families and from their community.

Jennifer was a single mother of one son and worked as a pediatrician. Responding to a question about what resources or people she sought out when she had questions about her son's care she said, "Honestly I usually call my mom or talk to women who've had kids, like older



women who have had children and have raised kids already. That is probably the first place I go to. And for health stuff, I try to do my own research a little bit but it is always better to go to the doctor.” Jennifer valued experiential knowledge in the day-to-day activities of childrearing. Mothers often began with their family, friends and as a last resort sought out books and doctors for additional support. Similarly Tracy a married, working mother of five, described that when she had questions about raising her child she sought out the advice of family and medical professionals. She said “[I go to] my mother or my sister. I went to my mother a lot... Called the advice nurse. There is no one outside of my family that I really talked to.” Kera a married, working mother of two, describing where she got advice said,

Experienced people that I know, who have been mothers and who I agree with the way they’ve raised their kids. People who are close to me like good friends of the family, or other mothers who have kids the same age or a little older... [At my Black Moms Mothering Group] I may talk about potty training, geared to someone who has boys, what is your strategy, what are you doing. So I just go to people who may have a little advice or have something to say (2009).

Kera’s advice came from mothers that she viewed as having experience and that she had been able to observe in order to evaluate if she agreed with their approaches to parenting. Being able to observe how mother parented their children and the results of those practices provided mothers with a sense of security in choosing specific approaches to parenting. Jennifer, Kera and Tracy shared a similar hierarchy of advice that was also reflected in the majority of mothers that I interviewed.

Even when mothers expanded their search for advice from their family and friends to online sources they continued to privilege experienced based sources of expertise over more formal indicators such as degrees. For example Robinne described her sources of advice in this way. She said,

My girlfriends who have babies or I should say have children really: My mother: one friend who has good experience -- she worked in a post partum hospital for about 11 years. So that was a really helpful resource, just her being a nurse and seeing babies in the hospital and that sort of thing. And then a couple of close girlfriends who have kids basically. And, I did get all those books and things when I was pregnant and I ended up not referring to them as much after she got to be about 2 or 3 months. So mostly it is like friends and family that I ask (2009).

Even though Robinne said that she “did get all those books and things” she ultimately did not use them much. Robinne became a part of a network of mothers who, along with mothers from her family, became her key sources of expertise and advice about raising children. Similarly Mera describe how her African-American mothers’ group and an online parent-to-parent email exchange were her key sources of advice. She said, “I do Berkeley Parents Network (“BPN”) and I ask friends in my moms’ groups and see what their kids are going through. I think that is about it.” BPN is an online network of over thirty thousand parents primarily from the San Francisco Bay Area. Through weekly email exchanges and an online archive parents share information about a range of topics including childcare sources and doctor and household service



recommendations to advice about the basics of early childrearing and specific challenges a child or parent may be facing. Trina also described how she used Berkeley Parents Network (BPN) to expand her sources of experiential knowledge. Trina said,

I actually posted something on Berkeley Parents' Network last week about a baby video and whether people thought they were helpful and I got like 25 responses. A lot of those folks on there have pretty high levels of education and you know they can relate to me on some of that stuff. There are other issues that I ask women at our church with older children about. I've talked to them. I talk to other moms.... but I feel like BPN is actually a pretty good resource for me because they have an archive of all the advice that has been given about whatever. I talk to her doctor a lot about her health stuff (2009).

Most of the time mothers combined family, community, professional and virtual sources of advice to assist them in parenting their children. Berkeley Parents' network and other online parenting list serves played a special role for some of the mothers in my sample whose immediate social circle and family was not primarily middle class and other mothers who lacked networks of support. For example Trina was firmly entrenched within a primarily non-middle-class African-American community. As a married, college educated woman who became a mother in her late 20's she stood out in a community in which many women became mothers early in life and remained single. Trina described how many of the people on BPN had high levels of education and this was a trait she shared with them. BPN served as a way for Trina to get advice from individuals who shared her educational level and access to additional economic resources but not her racial identity.

Another mother, Nia, a working mother raising two sons, noted that her heavy use of the internet was based on her lack of access to extended family and community networks that most mothers in my sample were in varying degrees embedded. Nia said,

I call myself the Google parent, because I think before... you parented in a group, you know you had mothers and sister and other women family members to like, this is how you discipline, or this is how you breastfeed, or this is how you deal with a sick child, but now we don't have that, so you just Google it. Like, okay, my child is colicky, I'm just going to Google it to find out how to deal with it or look online or even an online parents list serve or group or chat room or something. So, it's just a very different parenting style, trying to figure it all out, in relative isolation, you know (2009).

Nia's words echo the nostalgia present in Michelle Obama's comments about the support families had when she was growing up. Nia believed that mothers should ideally be surrounded by both family and community members who provide them with support and first-hand parenting advice. She became a self proclaimed "google parent" only because she lacked that kind of community. Through her online activities she sought to recreate these networks of support and experiential knowledge virtually. For each of these mothers, even in reaching out beyond their communities for advice and support, the currency upon which expertise was evaluated was the experience of raising children. Motherhood was not viewed as an identity that required intense study, guidance from experts, special training and seclusion. Instead experienced mothers, particularly their own mothers, were the key source of advice about childcare. This contrasts



with existing research that depicts middle-class mothers as being wary of advice from older mothers in their families because they are viewed as potential sources of outdated parenting practices (Hays 1999; Uttal 1999). Ultimately being a good mother was expert-guided but in a very different sense and based on a different level of assumed access to relationships with mothers in their immediate and extended family and their community networks.

### **Non-Maternal Care Choosing Similarity vs. Choosing Difference**

Just as Carol Stacks (1974) described poor African-American women's connection to and use of extended family, fictive kin and community members to assist them in their day-to-day lives, the African-American middle-class mothers in my research were also connected to similar networks that helped them find childcare providers. When relatives were not used as childcare providers, the mothers in my sample often began their search for market care by asking members of their family and religious and social networks for referrals. While the practice of seeking referrals from friends and family is not that surprising, many of the mothers in my sample did not just find childcare through their social networks, but they often found childcare providers *within* their network of family and community.

When seeking out market care mothers often sought out providers with whom they had developed "kin-like" relationships and who shared their own racial and cultural background. By selecting culturally similarly caregivers from within their networks mothers hoped to find people who would love their children as if they were their own and who would shield them from early experiences of racism. Robinne was a married working mother of one. Through her search for childcare she ultimately selected someone from within her religious community. Robinne described the person she selected stating, "I'd known her for 17 years. She was a member of my church. And while I was pregnant she became a licensed daycare provider. Some of the other members from my mothers' group had her look after their children" (2009). Rather than choosing a virtual stranger to care for her child, Robinne had a longstanding relationship with her childcare provider. She has the opportunity to get to know her through interactions at her church and in her community.

Similarly Alana, a working, mother of two, described how she found her childcare provider through family connections. She said, "My mom's friend's daughter, who is also my friend, told me about it. Her son was going there at the time" (2010). Alana, like other mothers, found a non-kin childcare provider by accessing family and community based networks. Finally, Tracy describing her childcare arrangements said, "my two year old and four year old go to daycare with my four year olds' godmother. She has looked after my 4 year old since she was about nine months so I really trust her with the kids and, you know, we are really good friends. We go to church together and we do things outside of daycare and church." In Tracy's case her childcare provider was also a long-term friend with whom she'd had multiple social interactions including church and other activities. Indeed Tracy was so close with her that she had asked her to be her daughter's godmother. Tracy childcare provider was someone that she knew before she had children. She had the ability to observe her childcare provider with other children on an ongoing basis. This was also someone who shared Tracy's racial, cultural and religious background.



If we think of networks as structures that have certain features or resources embedded within them, these quotes suggest certain features that are contained in African-American middle-class mothers' networks. The description of how Robinne, Alana and Tracy found their childcare providers suggests that the default networks of African-American middle-class mothers include sources of childcare that will support them in raising their children and pursuing careers. These descriptions of the relationships between childcare providers and parents and their ongoing participation in each other's social worlds stands in contrast to what is typically described in the literature as, at least initially, an arms-length relationship. Ultimately this childcare was not provided in an atomized site with a caregiver who was a part of a different community network. Instead these caregivers were often embedded in the community networks of the mothers who chose to use them. The mothers in my sample did not typically have to seek out childcare providers from the private sector by searching in parenting resource centers, childcare websites or craigslist. Rather many mothers found sources of childcare from within their existing social networks. In addition by using childcare providers that were embedded within their social networks these mothers had an additional source of informal observation and oversight regarding the care their children received. Often, a mother's relationships with their childcare providers did not stop at the end of the day. Instead these relationships extended to other parts of their lives. These childcare providers were converted from complete strangers to "known quantities". Often mothers had longstanding or quasi-kin relationships with their children's childcare providers and shared social and cultural backgrounds with them.

When choosing childcare from the market, the mothers I interviewed often sought to cultivate a familial relationship with their provider and at times they referred to their childcare provider as their child's second mom. Rebecca, a single mom of one son, describing the relationship between her son and his childcare provider said "They loved him for me during those times that I couldn't be there to love him and I can never appreciate them enough for that. He's grown up and he's a cool kid." Similarly, Netia, a single stay at home mother of one, described why she chose the specific center for her child and believed it was the best choice. She said,

"They are just an awesome school. One of the things that make them awesome is that all of the teachers have to have bachelor's degrees. Secondly, [the student/teacher ratio] is usually that every six to eight kids there is one teacher in a standard schooling system and their ratio is for every four children there is one teacher. So he's had so much one on one time and that is really where I think 85% of [my son's] intelligence comes from. Also, I brought him to the school at such a young age so he did not have any problem attaching to his caregiver. That was his second mom. [She] fed him, she would walk around with him. He had that loving and that caring so, I was blessed (2009).

Mothers who used either family or formal childcare providers viewed these relationships as ideally laden with emotions and having a familial quality. In this regard these mothers viewed the caregivers they chose in much the same way as the upper middle-class mothers in Julia Wrigley's (1995) research viewed choosing caregivers from similar backgrounds. The mothers I interviewed viewed culturally similar caregivers as skilled and able to assist them in socializing their children as African Americans. But there are important differences in these relationships



and the relationships described in Wrigley's (1995) book. These mothers did not have to make efforts to incorporate these caregivers into their families because they already had kin or kin-like relations with them. In addition, because of their ongoing relationship, at times spanning decades, the same power differentials did not exist. While these caregivers were able to assist these mothers in the racial socialization of their children, they were sometimes less equipped to address their children's class socialization and this was often a key reason that mothers sought out culturally dissimilar caregivers.

Among the working mothers who did not use extended family for childcare, tracking national patterns, the majority of mothers in my sample used either center-based childcare.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps this "preference" for center-based care can, in part, be explained by how racial identity impacts a mother's ability to comfortably deploy her economic resources to purchase different types of childcare. Indeed the New York Times article "Nanny Hunt can be 'Slap in Face' for Blacks" provides anecdotal support for such an explanation (Kantor 2006). In it the author recounted the challenges that several professional level African-American mothers encountered in hiring a nanny. Prospective nannies, including those who were African American and of Caribbean descent, were reluctant to have an African-American employer for fear that they would be looked down on by other caregivers, be paid less, made to do additional work or work in unsafe neighborhoods (Kantor 2006). While the mothers described in the New York Times article hardly represent a generalizable sample, the challenges described by them were echoed among the small number of mothers in my research that employed nannies. Nia's experiences hiring nannies to care for her children demonstrate these issues. Nia was married, and a working mother of two. When I arrived at Nia's house she was sitting in the living room completing an interview in Spanish and English with a prospective nanny to replace one she'd fired the week before. Nia described her belief that African-American middle-class mothers had a different relationship with the nannies they employed. She said,

"I kind of feel like nannies interact with white parents differently, and then sometimes the interactions are just a little different. We're also thinking of this relationship of two people of color, where one is the employer and one is the employee, but they're still two people of color. It is a different relationship than a white employer and an employee of color, which is what it is 95%, you know almost all of the time. So, you do get ideas and stuff, but it's still like just kind of making it up as you go along and figuring it out... and there needs to be like... some kind of book or magazine for people who employ childcare, you know (2009).

Nia's son actually started out in a childcare center but was now being cared for by a nanny. Nia changed his childcare because she believed he was experiencing racially discriminatory treatment from his caregivers at the center. For Nia it was important that the nanny she selected shared elements of her cultural background such as being able to speak Spanish and being a woman of color. She felt that this shared background would serve to insulate her son from the

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<sup>3</sup> According to a report published in 2006 entitled "Caring for Children of Color: The Child Care Patterns of White, Black and Hispanic Children, African-American children under 5 regardless of economic resources are more likely to use center based childcare. For other racial groups increased parental income and educational level is associated with increased use of center based care but there is no significant difference among African Americans from different educational and income levels.



racism he experienced at the daycare center. However finding a caregiver that met those qualifications did not ensure an absence of racial bias towards African Americans. Indeed, Nia had fired two other nannies because they seemed uncomfortable walking around her neighborhood and seemed scared in their interaction with African Americans in her community. As a result she was now in the process of hiring her third nanny and had now made discussions of race and racism a part of her initial screening process.

When mothers in my sample choose caregivers who were culturally different they did so with an eye towards the skills their children would acquire from being exposed to people from different cultures. Instead of viewing these caregivers as unskilled, they viewed them as being able to impart highly valued and specialized skills to their children but this did not come without costs. Selecting caregivers from different backgrounds meant mothers had the additional task of monitoring these caregivers racial bias.

### **Consistencies of Integrated Mothering**

Many of the mothers in my sample were raised in families in which education was emphasized. Even if their parents did not earn college degrees they urged them to get a higher education because that was the pathway to economic security. Often the mothers I interviewed and their families made sacrifices to ensure their educational aspirations became a reality. However existing research on middle-class mothers would suggest that when I asked the employed mothers in my sample, “If finances were not an issue would you stay at home with your children,” I would hear responses that distanced themselves from their careers and connected working outside of the home to enhancing their abilities as mothers. In some cases I did hear this. For example Nora’s justification matched this expectation. Nora, a married, working mother, raising two children said:

I like what I do, I think identity is a really interesting and funny thing; like I love being a mother when I’m with my kids, I love being with them, I love playing with them, I love watching them discover, and all those things. But I also love reading and writing and the kind of intellectual discourse of higher education, and I don’t think I would be completely happy doing just one or the other.... I think to not do it would make me an unhappy mother, and would actually hurt my kids (2009).

Nora justified her decision by emphasizing how her employment enhanced her mothering. Work was framed as a place that made her happy and provided her with the necessary emotional resources to be a good mother to her children. To justify working she does not highlight how good she is at her job or a preference for paid work over raising her children. Instead she focuses on how working outside of the home made her a better mother. Brandy had a similar view of why she would continue to work outside of the home. She said, “when I think about it, being in a work environment, we share stories and I learn things and it is great to bring that home. I met other parents at work with kids with [similar challenges]. These were things I would not have had access to if I was at home.” For Brandy her interactions at work not only had the benefit of rejuvenating her spirits but also had direct benefits of providing her with additional knowledge that would help her better parent her children.



While some of mothers responded to the hypothetical question “If finances were not an issue would you stay at home with your children?” in ways that conformed to the expectations of existing scholarship more often I heard mothers talk about the investment they made in their education, a duty to share their talents with their communities and a desire to serve as a role model for their daughters. After all, African-American women and mothers have not had to fight to participate in the public sphere of employment. While the accomplishments of the civil rights era produced better educational and occupational opportunities for African-American women, their feet were already firmly planted in the labor market. In addition, the African-American women who integrated predominately white campuses, while supported in varying degrees by their families, had to persevere in the face of both institutional and interpersonal racism on college campuses (Higginbotham 2001). These shared experiences of racism took a personal toll on the individual lives of African-American women and may have influenced how they justify working outside of home as mothers. In *Black Working Wives*, Bart Landry (2003) has argued that African-American middle-class mothers have been encouraged to be civic minded and, thus, value a commitment to community service. This commitment to service was reflected in how many mothers responded to the place of work in their lives.

When I asked Jennifer if she was financially well off enough to not have to work would she stay at home she responded, “I would work at least a couple days a week because I worked hard to get this education and to not help other people is not good. I think that with all the work and everything I went through to get educated I have to help other people besides just my family at the same time too it makes me a better more interesting person and happier to go out and do something and come home rejuvenated and give that to my son.” Mothers who worked outside of the home often justified this choice by focusing on the investment in their education and the desire to give back to the communities they grew up in. While work might have the added benefits of making them better mothers, their explanations for wanting to work focused on their duty to give back to their communities. One example of this is captured in the experiences of Hana who described herself as a “laid off at home” mother. Hana continued to work several days a week to earn a little income and to maintain her skill set while she looked for a permanent job. She emphasized that she could not be a stay at home mother because:

I love working outside of the home. I will not just be a mom...I feel like I am here with a purpose and a mission. I am here to serve and I am here to make an impression. To have some sort of legacy above and beyond my kids. I want to be a wonderful mother and I really hope that I get that from my kids but when it is all said and done I mean I have professional aspirations and also personal fulfillment aspirations. And the way things are right now I feel very stymied. Like I want to volunteer, I want to start something where I can give it back to the community (2009).

For Hana giving back to her community was something she felt compelled to do. She did not feel a need to demonstrate how working made her a good mother. She focused on her duty to contribute her skills to the world. Although Hana wanted to be a good mother she did not connect her activities outside of the home to enhancing or challenging her caregiving abilities. Jennifer and Hana like many mothers justified their decision to work based on the sacrifices that they and their families made to ensure they were college educated. They felt a duty to give back to their families and communities.



Mothers also emphasized how by working outside of the home they were setting an example for their daughters that they could be mothers and have successful professional lives. Teresa described,

“I worked hard to get this degree, I like to work. It is rewarding for myself and for my daughters to see me work too and I don't know I think it is important to me to work. I have a friend who does not work and she is bored and she feels like she is overwhelmed with her kids all the time and I'm just like you better do something. It's not that she hates her life but she resents having to stay home with the kids all the time and I don't want to feel that way (2009).

Teresa's explanation for her desire to work outside of the home focused on the effort she put into getting her degree and gaining skills that would benefit those beyond her immediate family. She also tied having a professional identity to her hopes for her daughter to believe she could accomplish both her personal and professional goals. Similarly Robinne said,

Over time I am setting an example for [my daughter] about being a woman and work and taking care of your family. Honestly if I didn't work our quality of life would go straight to put. I want her to live in a relatively safe environment at least based on what we can afford. And you know at whatever point when she gets old enough to see me in action I guess to see her mother doing important things or at least things that I think are important and carrying herself in a certain way and interacting with different types of people. To see that I am different than the way that I am at home. Like I am more than what I am at home. I have a life and people I that interact with and I think those things are positive. I don't want her thinking she has to get married to have a full life you know what I mean. That if it happens, if it doesn't, her life is not hinging on the right guy coming into her life at any particular point (2009).

For these mothers, working outside of the home was not reduced to providing for their families economically or pursuing individual professional pursuits. It was connected to giving back to one's community and to a view of self-sufficient and economically independent adult womanhood. As a consequence, mothers considered the impact that working outside of the home would have on their daughter's future expectations of adulthood. I discuss these views of adult womanhood in more detail in Chapter 3. This commitment to giving back to one's community seemed to be related to these mothers' beliefs that extended and community networks mattered in their lives. They mattered not just because of the immediate instrumental support they provided but also in the long term because of their ongoing benefits to their communities.

Mothers in my sample were also often open about their preference for work over engaging in the daily activities of childrearing. I argue that this is, in part, influenced by the assumption that their extended family would assist them with childcare and the view that paid employment was a key part of their identities as adults. Hana described how despite initially thinking being a temporary stay at home would be a good experience, ultimately she missed work and did not like the day-to-day tasks of caring for her home and her children. She said, “I thought I would have all this extra time and I would have a fat baby scrap book and the answer to



that is no. I am beat down. ...My hat is off to people who do it. I am getting a break. I am only doing it two days a week. If I had to do it five days a week with two kids I think I would be on prozac.” Hana had no difficulty pointing out the downsides of childrearing. While she enjoyed being a mother and wanted to be a wonderful mother and, as she said above, “ to get that from her kids,” an essential part of her identity was contributing to a broader community. Tracy voiced a similar set of tensions. She said,

I am definitely a working mom. I cannot stay at home. My mind is always doing something...I always knew that I would be a working mom and I always wanted to own my own business and do something else which is something I am kind of working on now. But I can't be a stay at home mom. I think that it is boring- the mundane everyday routine. I don't like it.... I think working just makes life interesting. For me to just sit at home and not have anything to do or just to have to do the same things throughout the house over and over again without anything different. I don't think I would be able to do that. I think if we had our own business things would be different. But just to stay at home I couldn't do that (2009).

Tracy was more explicit about not liking the task of raising children. She described those tasks as boring and mundane. The majority of working mothers in my sample did not feel the need to justify their decision to work outside of the home by distancing themselves from work. Their paid employment was viewed as a priority that demanded their attention and time and was a key part of their identity.

Even, among mothers who choose to stay-at-home with their children there was often a reluctance to say that working mothers were not capable of being good mothers. These mothers were quick to recognize that mothers might have a financial need to work or be more career-oriented and thus not working outside of the home would negatively impact their ability to be good mothers. In addition, mothers who stayed at home typically emphasized the personal nature of their decision and underscored that this was the choice that was right for them but that it might not be the case for other women. For example Lauren said,

I know a lot of women who are troopers and they pump. They are career women and they wanted to go back to work. I think absolutely if you want to go back to work after a few weeks. I support you in that. If you are a career woman and that is important to you and you have childcare taken care of, do that. But that is not me. My child is the most important thing to me right now and if I have the privilege and luxury to stay at home with him I am going to do that (2009).

Lauren attempted to walk a tight rope between her own preference to stay at home because that was the most important thing to her and not condemning other mothers of colors who made different choices. While a few mothers said they believed it was best for a child to be cared for by a parent when they were young most of the mothers who stayed at home highlighted that it was a personal decision that they were financially able to make. While traditionally feminist scholars have associated being a stay-at-home mother with an element of oppression most mothers in my sample did not view staying at home in that way. Perhaps because of the long history of African- American women working as childcare providers and domestics in white



homes, whether they stayed-at-home or not, most of the mothers in my sample viewed staying at home with their children as a privilege that most mothers could not afford. Mothers often tied their happiness to the happiness of the families. Thus if staying at home was economically feasible and made the mother happy that was a good choice but if it didn't make the mother happy it was a bad choice.

A major concern of mothers who choose to stay-at-home with their children was their young's children inability to communicate wrong doings to them. These mothers wished to ensure their children were safe and avoid care by a stranger or individuals who they did not trust. Describing her decision to stay at home with her children Elizabeth said, "[my husband and I] talked before we got married that the first two years were really critical and it made us nervous to put our child in childcare especially when they couldn't talk and we thought something would happen to him. We wouldn't even know so we always intended I would stay home for the first few years." Similarly Kera said, "My husband and my father actually requested that I stay home with my kids for 5 years. Knowing myself, that was not going to happen. I compromised on two. I said I do want the stay at home experience and I don't want to put them in daycare or preschool until they can kind of talk or communicate with me some." Finally Claire was a stay-at-home mother and was raising four children. In her description of why she choose to stay at home she highlighted her concerns about the quality of care her children would receive and also her belief that, with the support of her extended family, she should be able to care for her children. Claire said, "I've just heard too many terrible things about childcare that it was such a scary thing for me and it was probably all in my mind. Because I have always had family and friends take care of me the idea of a stranger was hard. Even me getting the nanny, I waited until I had four kids to get a nanny. I felt like I should be able to handle it with family or people close to me." Claire's statement that, "I should be able to handle it with family or people close to me," reflects the idealized version of family life that Michelle Obama described at the beginning of this chapter, one that envisioned mothers, either working or staying-at-home, being supported by kin as they raised their children. Before placing their children in childcare these stay-at-home mothers wanted to have the ability to ask their children about what happened and feel confident that their children's report would be accurate. In addition, like the employed mothers I interviewed many of stay-at-home mothers almost exclusively used trusted immediate family and kin to care for their children in their absence.

## **Conclusion**

These different approaches to caring for children and connecting with extended family are often primarily viewed as adaptations that families must make in order to account for their inability to attain the norm. However, I propose that these different approaches to family are not just modifications. Together they destabilize the presumed dominance of the Intensive Mothering ideology and the nuclear family form in five key ways. First they suggest the possibility that mothers can value different sources of expertise in determining how to best raise their children. Second they suggest that mothers can have different preferences regarding how childcare should be configured that do not demand the exclusive or primary care of children by a mother. Third, they suggest differences in views about how individuals create families and connections to family members. Fourth, they underscore a challenge to research seeking to disentangle the structural and cultural dimensions that influence childcare decisions when



maternal care is not chosen. While scholars may have the desire to identify the relative importance of cultural vs. structural forces these dimensions are often inextricably linked to each other. Fifth, they underscore that mothers may justify their decisions related to working outside of the home differently.

Each of these departures is shaped by a mother's racial identity, class and gender. Indeed, the attachment to the extended family and kin networks exemplifies this influence. For example, scholars suggest that upwardly mobile white mothers might see their continued connected to their extended family as an impediment as they shed their previous class background and blend into their new middle-class lives (Steedman 1987). By contrast, the upwardly mobile African-American mothers in my sample remained attached to their extended family because of a shared racial perspective and the instrumental support they provided. Overall my findings suggest that some mothers are influenced by different and/or competing ideologies of motherhood when making decisions about childcare. I argue that while the nuclear family is presented as the dominant and preferred family form, among African-American middle-class mothers there is a strong orientation toward maintaining, protecting and/or creating extended family and community networks. In the next chapter I examine how this different orientation to mothering and family supports and encourages different configurations and experiences of work and family life for mothers - what I call the *market/family matrix*.



## Chapter Three

### **Integrated Devotions: Enacting and Resisting Archetypes and Stereotypes of African-American Womanhood**

*That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Sojourner Truth 1851 Women's Right Convention Akron, Ohio)*

I begin this chapter with this iconic excerpt from Sojourner Truth's remarks at the 1851 Women's Right Convention in Akron, Ohio because it underscores how American society has viewed and continues to view different groups of women, specifically African-American and white women, through different logics and cultural expectations. While Truth speech supports the elite white women at the conference who are fighting for an expansion of women's rights and their ability to participate more fully in the public sphere, she simultaneously points out an important contradiction in how women from different racial groups were treated during this period. She does this by describing how African-American women were not recognized as women and, in fact, in many ways treated like men. This racial double standard is not limited to the nineteenth century, and, is, I argue, pervasive in America's treatment and expectations of women from different racial groups. In this chapter I explore how this double standard has influenced the decisions and experiences of African-American middle-class mothers' related to work and family. This double standard also influences the expectations that African-American middle-class mothers have for their own lives.

Despite the fact that white and African-American middle-class mothers have faced different economic, legal, social and cultural circumstances, sociological explorations of middle-class motherhood often primarily focus on white middle-class mothers (Gerson 1985, Hays 1996, Bobel 2002, Blair-Loy 2003, Miller 2007; MacDonald 1998; Wrigley 1995; Shuster 1993). When other groups of mothers have been included in this research the similarities of these groups' experiences with white mothers have been emphasized while any differences have been downplayed (Hays 1996, Blair-Loy 2003; Arendell 1999). In this chapter I identify two ideologies that have had a dominant influence on scholarly discussions related to work and family - the cult of domesticity and separate spheres (both defined below). These ideologies emphasize women's dedication to the domestic sphere (J. Williams 2001) and a stark division between the private world of family and the public world of work. Together these two ideologies support a particular orientation to what I call the "*market/family matrix*" that describes the characteristics of the family and the market and relationships between the two. The specific configuration of the family and the market can produce a market/family nexus in which mothers that work outside of the home experience conflict or integration.



The cult of domesticity and separate spheres ideologies have had a dominant influence on the decisions of many mothers related to work and family. Together these two ideologies have produced a market/family nexus of conflict for those mothers who choose to combine paid employment with raising children. However from their inception these ideologies and their related practices of womanhood and motherhood were not encouraged for all mothers. In particular, African-American middle-class mothers were historically excluded from the scope of these ideologies. As a group they had a different relationship to paid labor both legally and based on their economic circumstances. After all, African-American women were forcibly brought to this country to be sold into slavery- an institution that provided basic subsistence, but certainly not compensation for their economic and reproductive labor (Jones 1985). After slavery ended, African-American mothers' economic contributions continued to be necessary to their families' survival regardless of class status. These mothers were excluded from state policies created to benefit widowed mothers and as domestic and agricultural workers, they were excluded from the legal protections gained by early labor organizers after the Great Depression (Quadagno 1994). I argue that these differences, as well as others, have impacted African-American middle-class mothers' views and experiences related to combining work and motherhood.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section examines the two dominant ideologies related to motherhood that are discussed in the literature and it underscores how African-American middle-class mothers have been excluded from them. I briefly describe the emergence of the cult of domesticity and separate spheres ideologies in American society during the industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These two ideologies encouraged a new gendered division of labor in the household and a new vision of motherhood. However, at the same time, government policies directed at mothers often sent not so subtle messages that African-American middle-class mothers should work outside of the home rather than focusing on domestic duties within *their own* households. This emphasis is placed on "their own" households because African-American women were often employed as domestics for white middle and working-class households and thus their labor underwrote the new cultural expectations of motherhood that were produced by the ideologies of separate spheres and the cult of domesticity.

In the second section of this chapter, I provide evidence that African-American middle-class mothers are not only confronted by dominant/mainstream archetypes of womanhood and motherhood, but also alternative archetypes of womanhood and motherhood from within their families, the African-American community and the mainstream. Together these archetypes have supported and encouraged a different configuration of the market/family nexus for African-American middle-class mothers in which being a mother is not viewed as conflicting with working outside of the home. This section examines how two archetypes of African-American womanhood- the Welfare Queen and the Strong Black Woman- support and encourage the view that respectable African-American middle-class mothers should work outside of the home. The Welfare Queen is an archetype of extreme African-American female dependence and loose sexual morality that was produced during the Reagan-era to vilify and devalue welfare recipients who were increasingly African American and female (Hirschmann and Liebert 2001). These new recipients of welfare, engaging in what was once viewed as the noble task of caring for their children, were now cast as cheats who were unworthy of financial support from the state (Hirschmann and Liebert 2001). The Welfare Queen is an archetype or controlling image



(Collins 2000) that has been used to justify the subordinate place of African-American women in American society. It is a distillation of simultaneously raced and classed based stereotypes of African-American womanhood. The vast majority of the mothers I interviewed were confronted by and sought to refute some version of the Welfare Queen in their daily lives. By contrast, the Strong Black Woman is an archetype of extreme African-American female self-reliance and moral propriety that was forged primarily within African-American communities in response to negative mainstream images of African-American women but has also been produced through mainstream views of the strength of African-American women. The archetype of the Strong Black Woman plays on racially infused visions of who is an “authentically African-American woman” and who is a “true woman.” The Strong Black Woman archetype is related to the contradiction in how African-American versus white women are viewed in mainstream discourses. I explore how African-American middle-class mothers respond to these two archetypes and how these archetypes support and challenge their decisions related to work and family. In doing so, my research not only fills an empirical gap in the literature on middle-class mothers but my findings denaturalize the dominant view of the market/family nexus that is presented in this literature. My findings also underscore how all constructions of womanhood and motherhood, not just those applicable to African-American middle-class mothers are derived from specific social, cultural, political, legal and economic contexts. In this way, I contest the relevance of ideologies and practices of womanhood and motherhood that have been derived from the experiences of white middle-class mothers in the lives of other groups of mothers.

## **Ideological Backdrop**

The cult of domesticity and separate spheres are two related ideologies that have played an integral part in organizing our society based on a certain vision of the gendered division of labor and the relationship between the market and the family- what I refer to as the “*market/family nexus*”. The separate spheres ideology envisioned a specialization of men as the economic providers in their households and women as the homemakers who raised children (Williams 2001; Landry 2005; Hays 1999). Similarly, the cult of domesticity emphasized that women should exemplify four key virtues –piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Williams 2001; Landry 2005; Welter 1966). Together these ideologies affirmed the belief that a woman’s work was in the home and further specified how that work should be enacted and the standards against which it should be judged.

It is important to note, however, that these ideologies did not always exist; both concepts emerged during the same period that the industrial revolution and capitalism became durable parts of modern society (Welter 1966). These ideologies supported a certain vision of the market/family nexus in which family life was largely divorced from market life. Prior to this period the public and private sphere were not as starkly divided (Hays 1999; Weber 1930). These new views about womanhood and motherhood were also produced within a specific stratum of society (Landry 2005; Williams 2001). As is well known, initially these ideologies were forged in the homes of white middle and upper-middle-class families but they were ultimately presented to all white women and men as, both, an ideal to aspire to and a standard against which to evaluate their decisions related to family and work (Landry 2005; Welter 1966; J. Williams 2001; Coontz 2000). While many white working-class families continued to need the economic contributions of wives and mothers, many of these families were able to symbolically



conform to these ideologies by taking in boarders or engaging in paid work inside of the home (Coontz 2000; Landry 2005; Laslett and Brenner 1986). By contributing to their families through activities within their households their lack of conformity to the ideal was less visible to the public eye (Coontz 2000).

While scholars have argued that the separation of the workplace from the home encouraged by these ideologies was a necessary precondition for the transformations to the economic structure that occurred during this period (Weber [2002] (1930), Landry 2005) it is important to note that when these ideologies emerged the majority of African-American women (and men) in the United States were enslaved. For these individuals who were tethered to their jobs by their legal status as productive and reproductive property, this separation did not exist-their home was their workplace. Thus, relative to white women, African-American women had a very different understanding of their position in society regarding the place of work in their daily lives. Ideologies of racial difference and racism exempted African-American mothers from the “protective” and “patriarchal” discourses of separate spheres and the cult of domesticity (Simms and Malveaux 1986). For the majority of African-American women the public and private spheres of work and family coexisted in their legal, economic and social identities. As slaves African-American women were valued principally for their ability to be both economically productive and biologically reproductive (Jones 1985). African-American woman worked in the field and in the home alongside men regardless of their parental status. Enslaved pregnant women were often provided only a brief hiatus from their work duties and a short period of recovery after childbirth. New mothers typically resumed work obligations quickly, often bringing their children to work in the fields (Jones 1985). Thus, for enslaved African-American women being economically productive was a defining feature of their identities regardless of their parental status (Jones 1985). After slavery formally ended, African-American mothers continued to work as sharecroppers, domestics and in other areas of the labor force regardless of their status as parents (Jones 1985; Glenn 1992). While African-American women and white working-class women both contributed to their families, African-American mothers’ economic contributions were often more explicit. While white mothers were often able to contribute through work within their homes, African-American mothers’ contributions came from their employment in the public sphere. As a consequence they had to more directly negotiate the demands of working and raising children. Referring back to the contradiction underscored in Truth’s quote, society viewed these different groups of mothers through different logics and cultural expectations.

Indeed, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century when white first wave feminists were fighting for the opportunity to enter the public sphere of work and politics, African-American women and mothers’ were firmly rooted as active participants in the labor force. Historically, African-American women have been more likely to be employed outside of the home than white women (Landry 2003). While white and African-American women’s labor force participation rates began to converge in the late 1990s (Yoon and Waite 1994) African-American mothers have also historically been more likely to be employed while raising young children than their white counterparts (Landry 2003). In addition, while scholars primarily examine how the ideal worker norm has been used to exclude women, and specifically, mothers, from the workplace (J. Williams 2000), African-American women have often been held to a similar standard of presumed availability for their employers (Rollins 1987). For example when employed as



domestics<sup>4</sup>, African-American women have reported that they were assumed to be unencumbered and perpetually available workers who had access to family members to care for their children during their absence (Rollins 1987). Thus for African-American and white women, the challenges they faced as mothers were different and were influenced by fundamentally different logics of motherhood and the place of work in their lives.

The separate spheres ideology and the new tasks and demeanors required of womanhood as portrayed by the cult of domesticity were also supported by Progressive Era maternalist reformers as key rationales for creating government initiatives that would enable mothers to focus their attention on caring for their children and their homes (Minks 1996). These initiatives included policies that provided certain mothers with financial support to reduce or eliminate their work-day and laws that limited the workday for women based on the rationale that women should be able to focus on their duties within the domestic sphere (Minks 1996). For example, in the 1908 Supreme Court case *Muller vs. Oregon* the unanimous decision of the justices permitted the workday of women to be regulated based on their current and prospective position as mothers (208 U.S. 412 (1908)). This opinion contrasted with the prevailing jurisprudence of this period, known as the *Lochner* Era that prioritized the liberty of contract over the governments' right to regulate the workday. Thus women, at least those who were white, were deemed a class that warranted protection from the state because of their abilities to become mothers.

The ideology of separate spheres also influenced white men's economic position. For example in the 19<sup>th</sup> century male union members used the separate spheres ideology as one of the rationales for making claims for improved wages. These men bargained in the workplace to earn a "family wage" that would enable them to be "good providers" for their families and permit their wives to focus on being homemakers. It is important to note that when these ideologies emerged, like African-American women, most African-American men were enslaved and thus had no ability to bargain for increased wages. After emancipation, African-American men faced discrimination in employment and were often prevented from joining unions (Quadagno 1994). As a result of these different forms of discrimination, African-American men's abilities to earn a family wage were severely hindered and typically necessitated that African-American women work outside of the home (Landry 2003, Collins 2000). In the contemporary era, African-American men continue to face discrimination in the workplace (Pager 2003) and do not receive the same increases in their wages when they marry or become fathers as their white male counterparts (Hodges and Budig 2010; Glauber 2008). Because of the *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination that African-American men continue to face and have faced in the economy, African-American women generally did not assume that once they got married their husbands would earn a family income that would enable them to stay-at-home (Higginbotham 2001). Instead, African-American women, particularly those in the middle class, were encouraged to get an education so they could secure employment (Higginbotham 2001).

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<sup>4</sup> The share of employed African-American women who worked as domestic workers increased from one-third in 1910 to a peak of three out of five in 1930. In the 1960s when the ideal of the independent and self-sufficient nuclear family became a durable part of American society, one third of employed African-American women continued to work as domestic servants and thus underwrote the new domestic standards of the middle-class nuclear family.



The cult of domesticity also influenced the creation of early welfare policies for widowed mothers during the Progressive Era (Quadagno 1994). Proponents of Mothers' Pensions argued that mothers should be permitted to stay at home and raise their children (Quadagno 1994). While these pensions were often symbolic, functioning more often as economic subsidies to low income white mothers rather than entirely eliminating their need to work (Quadagno 1994), they sent a powerful message that under ideal circumstances white mothers should stay at home and care for their children. For the most part, the benefits of these Widows' and Mothers' Pensions (predecessors to contemporary welfare policies) were not extended to African-American mothers (Gordon 1994; Quadagno 1994). Although these programs did not explicitly exclude African-American mothers the terms "worthy" and "deserving" were interpreted to exclude mothers who were otherwise qualified from obtaining benefits (Quadagno 1994; Glenn 1994). For example, the definition of an "employable mother" differed by race and was constructed more broadly for African-American mothers. Women were either granted or denied access based on their potential to find work outside of the home. Employment as a domestic servant was often considered to be unsuitable for white mothers but appropriate for African-American mothers (Goodwin 1995). Social historian Linda Gordon (1994) has described how the administrators of these programs, particularly those in the southern states, believed that because African-American mothers had always worked they did not need financial assistance and they would and should be able to get along through their own devices. As a result, in the same region white mothers would be deemed eligible to receive benefits and subsidies that would reduce their need to work while African-American mothers would be deemed ineligible. When mother's pensions became a part of Aid to Dependent Children it was conditioned on states, particularly those in the south, retaining discretion in determining who was eligible to receive benefits (Abramovitz 1996). As a consequence, the primary beneficiaries initially continued to be white women with children (Abramovitz 1996).

The *de facto* exclusion of African-American mothers from these programs reinforced their identities as workers and their exclusion from dominant ideologies of motherhood. Indeed, when welfare recipients began to include a greater representation of African-American mothers these recipients were increasingly demonized in the media by conservative politicians and construed as deceitful and unworthy of benefits. Ronald Reagan first used the term "welfare queen" during his 1976 republican presidential campaign. A staunch opponent of welfare, in countless speeches Reagan recounted a description of mythical woman from the south side of Chicago who was abusing the system and received assistance she did not need or deserve. He said,

There's a woman in Chicago. She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over \$150,000 (Washington Star 1976).

The term "welfare queen" was thus conceived and popularized during Reagan's political campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s. His political strategists successfully mobilized opposition to welfare policies by employing images of African-American mothers with many children from different fathers as the prototypical beneficiary (Hirschmann and Liebert 2001). Rather than



being cast as the beneficiaries of financial assistance that would enable them to do the important work of raising children, these mothers were described as lazy, having a low work ethic and loose morals, and as deceiving the state about the number of children they were raising. Among the 'sins' of these women was that they were not working outside of the home and instead directly provided childcare to their children. The archetype of the welfare queen continues to have power both in the political landscape and the imagination of Americans (Blake 2012). Ultimately the message is clear: for African-American mothers who received benefits from welfare programs, the duties of motherhood also include employment. Staying at home and raising their children was and is not considered to be an appropriate use of their time.

African-American middle-class mothers have also been confronted by the archetype of the Strong Black Woman. The origins of the archetype of the Strong Black Woman are varied. Strength and resilience are characteristics that have become synonymous with being an African-American woman. Numerous examples in both mainstream and academic discourses highlight the strength of African-American women as an important element of their distinctive experience. For example, in a 1963 expose on "The Negro Woman," featured in *Ebony Magazine*, strength and resiliency were extolled as the core characteristics of African-American womanhood (Bennett 1963). Academic scholarship has also identified the strength of African-American women. For example, E. Franklin Frazier (1939), wrote that "[n]either economic necessity nor tradition has instilled in the [African-American woman] the subordination to masculine authority (pg 125)." Feminist scholars have also heralded African-American women's strength. More recently research has highlighted that African-American women are less likely to receive emotional support from kin networks or friends suggesting these women do not feel comfortable divulging emotional challenges to others (Sarkisian, Gerena and Gerstel 2007). This body of scholarship provides additional evidence that the ideologies of the separate spheres and cult of domesticity were not consistently encouraged across all racial groups of women and may be unequally accepted as the ideal for many African-American women. It does not however, explicate the archetypes of womanhood and motherhood that do influence African-American middle-class mothers' decisions and experiences.

A contemporary example of the logic of separate spheres is captured in the competing spheres framework (Blair-Loy 2003). According to this framework, those mothers who allot more time to work are viewed as having a stronger "work devotion" and those who allot more time to family are viewed as having a stronger "family devotion." This view - that choosing work is a rejection of family and the duties of motherhood- is a reinterpretation of aspects of the ideologies of separate spheres and the cult of domesticity. It also assumes a market/family nexus that views market and family as oppositional. Thus, while women are now able to engage in the public sphere the time they spend within that realm of society is presumed to evidence their lack of commitment to the private sphere of the family. Given this conflict between work and family, when scholars have sought to explain why some mothers continue to work outside of the home they have focused on economic explanations or they have focused on a mother's individual drive to fulfill her self-interest in the work world (Blair-Loy 2003). Mothers who work outside of home either do so because it benefits the financial well being of their families or because they have internalized male orientations to work and their desires to pursue professional goals outweigh their desire to focus on their children. Thus, mothers' decisions related to work and family continue to be made against a backdrop that envisions working outside of the home as in



conflict with, and separate from, being a mother. This version of the market/family nexus that is characterized by conflict was derived primarily through examining the experiences of middle-class white mothers who have been confronted by a specific set of social, cultural, legal and economic circumstances and expectations which have influenced their relationship to paid employment outside of the home and work within the home.

Given the racially varied historical experiences of combining motherhood and work recounted above, there are many reasons to suspect that African-American middle-class mothers might experience a different market/family nexus. Many African-American women were raised in households with working mothers and/or saw examples of two parents contributing financially to the home. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center has found that African-American mothers are, in fact, more likely to prefer working full-time while raising children than Latino and white mothers (Taylor et al. 2007). Historically, African-American mothers of young children have been more likely to work than white mothers, or other racial/ethnic groups of mothers (Cohany and Sok 2007). Heretofore, scholars have only speculated explanations for this difference in preferences and behaviors, but to my knowledge no research has empirically investigated why African-American mothers have a higher preference for full-time work than other mothers. In addition, research also suggests that African-American married couples have more egalitarian gender ideologies than white married couples (Vespa 2009). Based on these different historical relationships to work and mothering and different perspectives on the household division of labor, African-American mothers may not experience working as a sign of a decreased devotion to motherhood.

While white women have been presented with modern archetypes of womanhood that are either career-oriented, family oriented, or conflicted when combining working outside of the home and motherhood, there is ample evidence that African-American middle-class women have been presented with, and created, different archetypes of womanhood and motherhood. While African-American middle-class mothers have certainly been exposed to these dominant ideologies of womanhood and motherhood alternative archetypes of African-American womanhood and motherhood have been forged within their own communities and the mainstream. Scholars have shown how negative archetypes or controlling images of African-American womanhood such as the “welfare queen”, “mammy”, “matriarch” and “jezebel/vixen” have influenced mainstream perceptions of African-American women and how government policies affecting African-American mothers are formulated (Collins 2000; Woodard and Mastin 2005; Hirschmann and Liebert 2001). Collins (2000) argues that these images are elite white male interpretations of African-American womanhood and serve as powerful rationalizations for African-American women’s subordinate place in society and their continued oppression. Collins (2005) describes how African-American middle-class mothers have engaged in a politics of respectability within the African-American community that emphasizes cleanliness of person and property, temperance, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity. The purpose of the politics of respectability was to enable African-American women to achieve an identity that was defined outside of the parameters of racialized discourses of womanhood (Collins 2005). Even when African-American middle-class women adhered to standards of the cult of domesticity these ideals were tempered by expectations from the African-American community that they be engaged in the public sphere (Landry 2003; Carlson 1992). Elite white women, who have had to contend with their own versions of controlling images, have also simultaneously benefited



from the power of these interpretations of African-American motherhood and womanhood (Rollins 1987, Collins 2000). After all, as Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1991) argues, if not for the tenuous and unstable position of African-American women and other women of color within the American economy, white women would not have had access to a reliable labor supply of women to work in their homes and help them adhere to these new standards of domesticity. Glenn (1991) writes, “A careful reading of the history of Black, Hispanic, and Asian-American women workers reveals a persistent racial division of “women’s work.” This division of labor subjected women of color to special forms of exploitation, subordinating them to White women and ensuring that their labor benefits White women and their families (pg. 1335).” The racial power dynamics required to achieve the standards required by the cult of domesticity are often overlooked, in favor of emphasizing the shared sources of women’s oppression (Glenn 1991).

Echoing these divergent archetypes of motherhood, scholars of intersectionality have underscored how the cultural context of the United States has not been characterized by uniformity. Instead the United States social context has historic and contemporary divisions based on intersections of racial, cultural, economic and political identities. Collins (2000) and Landry (2003) each argue that African-American women were never able to, or encouraged to, live up to these ideologies and thus produced their own distinct and positive visions of womanhood. Landry (2003), using a combination of census data and the writings and speeches of key African-American female activists, argues that African-American middle-class women in the early part of the 20th century were proponents of an alternative ideology of womanhood which combined family, career and community. He argued that this alternative ideology explains African-American women’s greater and more continued participation in the workforce relative to their White female counterparts (2003).

Similarly, in her groundbreaking work *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) outlines the various ways in which African-American women have been excluded from white femininity. She underscores that in response to degrading controlling images of Black womanhood that were produced and projected by mainstream society to justify their oppression and coerce certain behaviors, African-American women engaged in a continual practice of self-definition creating their own conceptualizations of ideal motherhood and womanhood that reflected their own values and life experiences (Collins 2000). For example, the idea of African-American women’s super human strength was used as the logic to exclude them from the category of “true womanhood” and served as a powerful rationale to justify and ignore their disparate treatment in society (Collins 2000, 2005; hooks 1981, 1984; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Collins 2005; Harris-Lacewell 2008). African-American women’s financial contributions to and autonomy within their families was identified as the root of problems within the African-American family (Moynihan 1965). The Black Matriarch was formulated as an emasculating figure that produced the fragile economic position of African-American families (Moynihan 1965). However African-American women rejected these interpretations of their strength as negative and, instead, embraced strength as a key virtue to which to aspire.

Collins’ theoretical contributions draw on a variety of sources including literary texts and speeches but she does not explicitly examine how her theories manifest themselves on the ground in the quotidian practices of contemporary African-American women. In addition, while she identifies a set of controlling images produced by mainstream elites that African-American



women are confronted by in their daily lives she has less to say about the influences of ideals of womanhood that are produced through African-American women's process of self-definition and valuation. Similarly, Landry assumes that the speeches and writing of African-American middle-class female activists are an accurate reflection of the beliefs of contemporary non-activist African-American women. Largely absent from these discussions is how average African-American women are influenced by, and respond to, archetypes of womanhood and motherhood that have been produced within their communities and in the mainstream. Specifically, how do African-American middle-class mothers negotiate these representations of womanhood that have been created at times to empower and at times to oppress them? What consequences do they face when they enact or fail to enact the related practices of these archetypes? As opportunities have expanded for African-American women in American society, particularly for those in the middle class, these women may now view living up to these archetypes of womanhood as a burden, rather than a badge of honor. In addition, how do African-American middle-class mothers manage mainstream assumptions that they are poor, unmarried and on welfare?

This chapter begins to remedy these absences in the literature. First, I examine the prevailing societal and community assumption that African-American middle-class mothers will work outside of the home. I then investigate how the archetypes of the Welfare Queen and the Strong Black Woman (SBW) influence African-American middle-class mothers' decisions related to work and family. I examine how mothers manage assumptions related to the archetype of the Welfare Queen- an image derived from mainstream beliefs that African-American mothers are poor and on welfare. I examine how mothers negotiate the Strong Black Woman archetype in their day-to-day lives. The Strong Black Woman can be viewed as the end product of a revaluation and reorientation of ideas and characteristics associated with the controlling image of the Black Matriarch. I argue that together, the archetype of the Welfare Queen and the Strong Black Woman serve as cultural supports for the view that African-American middle-class mothers should work outside of the home.

### **The Market/Family Nexus**

While existing research would suggest that middle-class mothers who decide to stay-at-home with their children are conforming to practices related to dominant ideologies of motherhood in society, among the African-American middle-class mothers I interviewed, staying at home was a complicated and radical act. Most mothers shared the experience of being raised by mothers who worked outside of the home and/or seeing examples of such mothers in their communities. As children, the mothers I interviewed were encouraged by their parents to be economically self-reliant as adults. They were also presented with positive examples of mothers who worked before and after having children in order to contribute financially to their households. For the mothers who participated in my research a different market/family nexus was presented to them and existed in their lives - one of integration.

Further illustrating this market/family nexus of integration, many of the mothers who stayed at home felt varying degrees of pressure from spouses, relatives and community members to work outside of the home. Notably, although a third of the mothers I interviewed identified as stay-at-home mothers, nearly half of those mothers actually engaged in part-time to full time



employment. These mothers arranged their employment so they could reconcile their desires to be available to their children during the day-time and non-school hours with their desire or, at times, sense of duty to be financially independent.

### *Working Motherhood- A Normal State Of Affairs*

Examples of mothers in their communities that combined raising children with paid employment were powerful influences on what mothers saw as the norm that they should work towards as adults. At times these positive examples of working motherhood were also paired with negative examples of women who did not work outside of the home and as a consequence did not appear to have power in their marriages or households. For example Nia underscored how mothers in her community influenced her expectations of what her life would be like when she had children. Describing why she always felt she would be a working mother, Nia said, “I don’t think I even knew anybody that stayed home, so, I didn’t have that as a framework. I didn’t see any women that stayed at home with children. You know, especially ones that had an education. And I knew that I would be college educated” (2009). For Nia the idea that she would not work seemed almost unfathomable to her, particularly after investing her time and energy into earning a college degree. Thinking back on the things that influenced her decisions related to family and work it was clear that the examples of working mothers in her community influenced her view of what was the ideal. Her ideal vision of motherhood included balancing work and raising children. Rather than viewing motherhood as an experience that was, at least initially, separate from working outside of the home, Nia viewed these two activities as co-existing. Nia’s quote also underscores how racial identity and the experience of upward mobility can influence a mother’s view of the place of paid employment in her life. Nia was the first generation in her family to be middle class and this had been achieved through enormous investments in her education and sacrifice both from herself and her family. Nia was raised in a working class neighborhood where it was common for mothers to be engaged in paid employment. The idea that an African-American woman would improve her employability by getting an education and then not work outside of the home challenged her common sense expectations of the choices a mother should make for herself and her family. Nia’s quote underscores the power of family and community models of motherhood in setting the expectations of what the duties of motherhood would and should include. Her life experiences had a powerful influence on her view of the normative duties of mothers.

Essence was a physician and she was the married mother of one child. She shared the belief that mothers should contribute to the household financially. Answering a question about the duties of mothers versus fathers she said, “both people have to raise the kids and both people have to bring home the money. There is not man’s job and woman’s job. We have bills to pay so everyone has to work and there are kids to raise so everyone has to do that.” Essence drew on the language of egalitarianism. This was the model she grew up with in her household of origin. Her mother and her father both worked outside of the home. Essence believed that financially providing for the household was both parents’ responsibility. She also could not envision herself as a stay-at-home mom because she viewed it as abdicating power in her marriage.

During Charlene’s childhood she envisioned that she would be a career woman. She wanted to be self-sufficient and be able to choose a partner based solely on whether he was a



good man, rather than his income earning ability. She said, "From the time I was a kid I thought I would be a mother with a career. I wanted to be able to support myself. Not need anybody to take care of me. And my mindset was that I would be completely self-sufficient. I would not need someone to support me from a financial perspective." Charlene was aware that she would be unlikely to find an African-American male partner who could match her earning potential so her solution was to take the category of earning potential out of her equation for what makes a good partner, instead focusing on other qualities. Charlene's approach to choosing a mate defies traditional approaches that emphasize that being a good husband and a father means being a strong economic provider for one's family. Charlene associated being a mother who worked outside of the home as directly linked to her ability to make decisions in her life based on preference rather than necessity. While she wanted to get married and have children, she wanted to select a mate based on qualities other than earning potential. Similarly Brandy, describing her parents' expectations for her as an adult, said, "They wanted me to be independent, they wanted me to be smart about the way I lived my life. And I remember my mom telling me something about always relying on yourself so you can do what you want to do in your life. I definitely took that to heart" (2009). Drawing on the ideal of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, Brandy saw working outside of the home as important. In addition, Brandy underscored that the need to be self-sufficient was instilled in her throughout her life through messages from both her parents. Ultimately, when Brandy became a mother she did not consider staying at home because it would have meant giving up her independence. Charlene and Brandy's determination to be economically self-reliant and self-sufficient conformed to the archetype of the Strong Black Woman and these traits supported them as they accomplished their life goals. For Charlene this meant choosing a mate based on preference and for Brandy it meant engaging in both the public and private spheres. Similarly, Robinne identified a long-standing belief that she would not be a stay-at-home mother. She said, "I never had a desire to be a stay-at-home mom. I like to work; I like the work that I do. I like interacting with adults about adult things. And work is one of the places I get to do that on a regular basis, on a daily basis. I always knew that I would be a working mother"(2009). Based on Robinne's life experiences, good mothers did not have to stay at home and could, in fact, have demanding and fulfilling careers outside of the home while simultaneously raising children.

Brandy, Charlene and Robinne, each drew upon models of motherhood that they saw in their families and communities that do not neatly fit into traditional expectation of how and why mothers choose to work outside of the home. These examples greatly influenced their beliefs about what their lives would and should be like when they had children. For each of the mothers described above, rather than viewing having a career as conflicting with being a mother, working and being a mother went hand in hand. Some talked about the need to work as a desire to be self-reliant and financially independent while others believed it was important to be engaged in the world outside of their home both for themselves and to serve as examples to their children. But working outside of the home was not viewed as a hardship; it was viewed as a normal state of affairs.

Existing research on middle-class mothers would suggest that, at least within the American<sup>5</sup> context, mothers choosing to work outside of the home would feel ambivalence and

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<sup>5</sup> Denise Segura's (Year) research on Mexican American and Chicano mother provides an interesting counter to the American model. She finds that Mexican American mothers have adopted an American ideal of motherhood and



inner turmoil about that decision and those choosing to stay-at-home would experience less conflict. The vast majority of mothers in my research did not see working out of the home as producing these consequences and this defies the predictions of existing research. To be sure, these mothers experienced stress when juggling the demands of work and home. These also admitted that if finances were not a concern they might have stayed-at-home for slightly longer periods of time with their children. Ultimately, however, these mothers largely viewed being a mother who worked outside of the home as a normal and natural path rather than some remarkable accomplishment that would create turmoil and generate harsh compromises in their lives.

### *The Radical Act of Staying At Home*

While historically the vast majority of African-American mothers were unable to stay-at-home, increasingly African-American middle-class mothers have diverged from the default path of combining working outside of the home with raising children and have decided to be stay-at-home mothers. Indeed, approximately one third of the mothers that I interviewed identified as stay-at-home mothers. At face value, these mothers' decisions to stay at home suggest that some African-American mothers have internalized dominant frameworks of mothering and, now having access to the required material resources are enacting their related practices. That explanation may partially explain these mothers' choices. For example, many of these mothers voiced concerns related to monitoring their children's treatment and making sure their children stayed on the right academic and social paths; these are concerns that are shared by white middle-class mothers. These mothers' also worried about their children's racial safety and racial identity. In Chapter 2, I analyzed mothers' orientations toward childcare and argued that these concerns were often heightened by the prospect of placing children in predominately white childcare and educational settings where they might have early experiences of racism that their children could not relay to their mothers. In Chapter 4, I examine how a mother's approach to parenting her children is also influenced by her desire to create peer groups of color for her children. Ideally these peers groups share her family's values and foster specific types of racial and class based identities in her children. In addition, supporting the view that African-American middle-class mothers are assumed to work outside of the home, many of the stay-at-home mothers reported feelings of resistance and disapproval from spouses, family members and sometimes friends regarding their decision to stay-at-home and not financially contribute to their household. Some said that their spouses continued to expect that they would find ways to earn an income and pay for certain expenses, while others felt pressure to return to work resulting from comments from friends and relatives that they were not sufficiently pulling their weight in the family.

Jessica's decision to stay at home was not met by support from her husband. She and her now ex-husband had agreed she would return to work after the birth of her child, but when the time came Jessica decided to quit her job and stay-at-home. Prior to quitting her job Jessica earned more money than her husband so by choosing to stay-at-home with her child she was cutting their household income by more than half. Jessica recounted, "After I became pregnant it was expected that I go back to work... but I didn't go back to work, I stayed home and took care

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thus experience conflict when they work outside of the home. By contrast Chicano mothers still retain a Mexican ideal of motherhood and thus experience conflict when the do not work outside of the home.



of my daughter because that was what was in my heart to do. Ultimately that led to the problems that led to my divorce because that wasn't the marriage agreement you know." Jessica's husband expected that she would return to work and resume her six-figure salary job that would enable them to easily retain the lifestyle they had achieved. Jessica like many African-American married women was in a hypogamous marriage- she earned more than her husbands. It was not just that her husband resisted the idea of her staying at home but she also received little support from other family members. Jessica recounted, "no one else in my family, not my husband, not my mother, not my friends. Everybody thought I was absolutely crazy to leave a job like that and they thought it was laziness." After a year of staying at home Jessica said she decided to enroll in a graduate program to get her family to stop asking when she planned to return to work. For Jessica, making the decision to stay-at-home defied both the expectations her husband had for married life but it also defied her community's expectations. Ultimately her marriage was a casualty of this mismatch of expectations and her decision to stay at home. Approximately one third of the stay-at-home mothers that I interviewed described facing similar comments from their families and this contributed to them feeling conflict about their decision. These comments from spouses and fellow members of the African-American community demonstrate how the expectation that African-American middle-class mothers will work outside of the home impacts their family and work life decisions. This remains true even when mothers choose to stay at home and do the work of being the primary caregivers for their children. These mothers felt they had to justify that decision to their family, community and mainstream society in relationship to, and in tension with, a different view of motherhood.

Somewhat surprisingly, almost half of the mothers who identified as stay-at-home mothers actually worked part-time to full-time jobs. Generally these jobs were not traditional 9am-5pm hours so these mothers had some flexibility about their work schedules. Mothers worked the night shift or during the portion of the week that their child(ren) attended part-time daycare or preschool. In this way these "stay-at-home" mothers were able to be available to their children during the daylight and out of school hours. When these children weren't in the care of their mothers they typically remained in the care of family members- fathers, grandparents, aunts, etcetera. In the next two sections I will discuss how the archetypes of the Welfare Queen and the Strong Black Woman together support the assumption that African-American middle-class mothers should engage in paid employment. I also show how these mothers' responses to these archetypes reflect both an awareness of, and increasing access to, dominant ideologies and practices of motherhood.

### **Negotiating the Archetype of the Welfare Queen**

The majority of African-American middle-class mothers felt they had to navigate and challenge assumptions about being poor and on welfare in their daily social interactions- the archetype of the Welfare Queen. These mothers felt compelled to dispel these assumptions in order to ensure they and their children were treated as members of the middle class. Being perceived as middle class was something that these mothers (and their children) had to consistently achieve through visual cues like dress, hairstyle and accessories (like wedding rings), their vernacular and social cues including marital status, occupation and cultural capital. These mothers believed that African-American mothers that stayed at home with their children, and African-American mothers overall, often had to overcome the assumption that they were



welfare recipients. For example, Kristen a married mother of two described how assumptions about being on welfare made her reluctant to be a stay at home mother. She said:

I don't think it is really acceptable for black women who are professional women to stay at home.... You just don't see it that much and I often wonder what the stigma of that is. Like is it a choice or because of something else... Black women are portrayed as welfare recipients with a bunch of kids so I think the assumption could be that you are staying at home because you are one of "them" as opposed to you, chose to be home to raise your child... I think about my mom or other women who are single parents and are working and they manage to work everyday and they come home and deal with their kids and they do it and they seemingly do it fine and then I look at myself and I am tired all of the time and there are not enough hours in the day and I am wondering am I taking the easy way out if I stay at home. You know, other women have done it so why can't you do it (2010).

Kristen's quote identified her perception that racial identity shapes how American society evaluates mothers who work outside of the home and mothers who stay-at-home. For African-American mothers the norm is working outside of the home and, in fact, being a non-working mother is viewed as an unusual or deviant identity. While mainstream debates often pit being a good mother against being a good worker (Belkin 2003), many African-American middle-class mothers saw working outside of the home as a part of their identity as good mothers. Kristen's belief that African-American stay-at-home mothers were often assumed to be on welfare was shared by other mothers in my sample, both those who worked outside of the home and those who were stay at home mothers. Like, Kristen, these mothers believed that both the American mainstream and the African-American community had different assumptions about the place of work in the lives of African-American mothers and that those assumptions ran counter to dominant discourses related to motherhood. Thus, African-American middle-class stay-at-home mothers were not revered, but instead were stigmatized.

Indeed, the mothers in my sample described the additional identity work they engaged in to be recognized as middle-class mothers instead of just African-American, and by assumption poor mothers on welfare. These mothers managed how their economic class was perceived as they arranged and carried out the daily needs and activities of their children. For example, Kristen, a married mother of two, described how she ensured that she was not perceived as, what she called, a "wild parent." She said " I want people to know that I am married, that I am a professional, I don't like to [emphasize those things], but I do believe people receive me differently because I am married or because of my professional status." Kristen believed African-American mothers were assumed to be poor and on welfare so she explicitly countered this by mentioning her husband or her profession in conversations with others. She was also typically dressed in clothing that communicated that she was a professional.

A simple visit to the doctor's office could create a setting in which a mother felt a need to assert her class status in order to ensure she and her children were treated with respect. This was the case, particularly when a mother's personal history matched some of the stereotypes of the welfare queen. Maya, a married working mother of four, described taking her children for their annual check-up. Each of Maya's children was a product of a different marriage and took the last names of their respective fathers. She said:



In the doctor's office, I can see people start to categorize me with all the kids, with all the last names. I make sure they know I have a PhD because there is a way that my class status supersedes my race and how they are positioning me based on my race. So I counter it very explicitly. You know I dress certain ways on airplanes and I talk to my children about that and say that I don't want people to think I am some young ignorant person. I dress like this so they know I am a professional and they have to respect me (2009).

Maya recognized that in mainstream settings like the doctor's office or the airport she was likely to be categorized as a poor, single and sexually promiscuous mother on welfare. She knew that because her children had different last names that would signal that they were from different relationships and would confirm the assumptions she believed people were already prone to make. To counter those assumptions she deliberately highlighted her educational credentials and occupations to emphasize her middle-class status. Underscoring her employment outside of the home in a professional occupation enabled her to quickly dispel assumptions about her class and social status. Maja also described how she took steps in other settings to signal her middle-class status through appropriate dress and demeanor. When she flew on a plane she did not think about traveling in comfortable clothing. She focused on communicating that she was a professional and thus should be afforded the same treatment that other white middle-class travelers would be afforded regardless of their attire.

Similarly, Hana, a married mother of two who was temporarily a stay-at-home mother due to a lay-off, said she felt people assumed she was single and on welfare when she went on outings with her children during the day. To guard against these assumptions she said,

I think about how I am dressed, like do I have a scarf on my head today while I am taking a walk with my children. And, I am always worried about that perception, wondering if people are thinking I am just another ghetto mother, or if I don't have my (wedding and engagement) ring on and I am out with my kids, I wonder if people are thinking here comes another 'baby mama'. I am very aware of that and through the course of conversation I will mention my husband and let it be known that I am married (2009).

Hana also signaled her middle-class status by her dress and marital status and specifically identified that she did this to ensure she was not treated as a "welfare queen." Again, this need to communicate her class status was something that occurred regularly in casual interactions in public. Hana was cognizant that she engaged in these class perception management activities and believed they impacted how people treated her. Many other mothers also saw being married as a key signal to others that they were middle class. Thus it was common for women to refer to husbands in social interactions in order to identify themselves as married. Stay-at-home mothers did this to highlight that they were at home based on the financial support of a husband rather than the financial support of the state.

African-American middle-class mothers also identified interactions that they had with white middle-class mothers that created a sense that they were being categorized as non-middle class and thus not belonging in certain settings. A standoffish demeanor combined with a more cordial one to other white mothers that were present, subtly communicated to the mothers that I



interviewed that they were not fully accepted at certain mother-child activities. These sorts of activities included parks in predominately white neighborhoods and various mommy and me activities. The African-American middle-class mothers in my sample felt they needed to demonstrate their class status to white mothers before these mothers would meaningfully engage with them- work they did not observe other white mothers had to do. Without these signals some mothers felt white mothers assumed they were economically disadvantaged. For example, Jennifer was employed as a pediatrician and, despite being a single mother, considered herself to be financially well off. She indicated that several times she had gone to playgrounds with her son who was nearing the age for kindergarten and ended up in “odd” conversations with white mothers about school selection. When she mentioned a private school that she was considering for her child these white mothers would often encourage her to apply for financial assistance based on their assumption that she would be eligible. Jennifer said that sometimes she would reveal that she was a pediatrician to these mothers and other times she would let these mothers retain their assumptions. While she felt that these mothers were probably just trying to be helpful, she also felt their assumptions revealed a mindset about certain types of people- African-American mothers- as poor. Ultimately these exchanges left Jennifer feeling annoyed and out of place in these settings. These exchanges also made her reluctant to build relationships with these mothers.

These quotes illustrate that identifying oneself as a mother who works outside of the home in a professional career was one effective strategy that mothers used to quickly overcome assumptions that they were not middle class. These quotes also demonstrate that being treated as members of the middle class is something that African-American middle-class mothers and their families cannot take for granted, but instead must work to achieve. While white mothers are readily recognized through the lens of middle-class motherhood, African-American middle-class mothers must work to achieve this recognition. These mothers largely felt that people assumed that they would not devote the same care and attention to the choices they made about their lives and the lives of their children. They wished to dispel those assumptions. For example, a mother might volunteer over the course of a casual conversation with White mothers (who were virtual strangers to them) the types of activities their children were involved in, recent vacation destinations, restaurants they visited, or specialized knowledge they had about specific topics. By engaging other White mothers about this shared knowledge or shared experience they believed that they successfully communicated that they were middle class, that they would then be treated accordingly and that they and their children should be welcomed into their middle-class circle.

### **Negotiating the Archetype of the Strong Black Woman**

The Strong Black Woman or the black superwoman refers to an archetype of African-American womanhood that embodies strength, self-sufficiency, emotional resilience, self-sacrifice and piety (Collins 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009). The Strong Black Woman (SBW) can handle the problems of her family and never needs or asks for help from others, least of all from a man. This archetype of womanhood can perhaps be best viewed as the reformulation of the racially oppressive controlling image of the Black Matriarch into an, at times, racially empowering ideal of African-American womanhood. Among the mothers I interviewed a dominant archetype of womanhood that influenced their decision-making was



some version of the “Strong Black Woman” (Collins 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009). While most mothers were critical of this archetype, many continued to adhere to elements of its prescribed practices. The belief that African-American women needed to be strong was something that influenced how these mothers evaluated and made choices in their lives and the kinds of support they were willing to seek out from friends and family.

### *Working Mothers Invested in the Strong Black Woman*

Farah<sup>6</sup> was married and a working mother of two. She had her first child when she was in college and had recently given birth to her second child. Having recently finished an advanced degree and starting a new job, Farah and I met in a café near her work, where she planned to return after our interview. Farah was clear about what the ideal African-American mother should be like. She said, “A strong woman who can do all of the “Big Momma” things— she can cook like nobody else can cook, she can iron, do all that stuff like nobody else can do but then she also does her own thing, whether that be work or some other activity... she is very confident of who she is and what she wants in her life. She can do it all on her own (Farah 2009).” In this quote, Farah described what she felt was expected of her as adult woman and mother. She defined the ideal African-American mother as a woman who took care of her children and household, provided financially for her family and/or took an active role in the community. Farah did not completely enact this ideal in her own life but she understood that friends, family and members of the African-American community would judge her against this ideal. Farah said it was hard for her to ask for emotional support or other types of help but she was getting better at convincing herself that it was okay. Seeking assistance from others challenged her view of how she should be as an adult woman and a mother- strong, self-reliant and resilient. For Farah asking for help was uncomfortable because it required her to acknowledge that she could not do it all and could not always be a Strong Black Woman. Farah described how in her own life the Strong Black Woman archetype encouraged her to demonstrate behaviors that signaled strength and discouraged those that signaled weakness.

Other mothers I interviewed were also encouraged throughout their lives to be strong and resilient as adults. For example Kristen said, “I’m a strong black woman and I am proud of it.” When I asked her what it meant to be a strong black woman she said, “To know your mind, to know what you want, to not compromise your values, don’t compromise who you are... You have to be strong in this society because there are so many people who are trying to define you as a black woman. How you should be, what you should look like, who you should be with. How you should act.” For Kristen, part of being a Strong Black Woman was being able to withstand the pressures of society’s expectations of what she should be as a woman. Instead Kristen believed that a Strong Black Woman knows who she is and defines herself rather than letting others, either within the African-American community, or within the mainstream, define her. Kristen’s description of the Strong Black Woman echoes Patricia Hill Collins’ depiction of the way that African-American women, not just those who are the middle class, have been compelled to engage in a continual process of self-definition and self-valuation as a survival strategy (2000). In this case, Kristen connected being a Strong Black Woman with the ability to see one’s own value and worth as an African-American woman within a society that might not share that view.

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<sup>6</sup> All names have been changed.



Living up to the ideal of the Strong Black Woman also meant that mothers should be emotionally resilient and be able to rebound from personal setbacks quickly. Many of the mothers in my sample believed that having these skills would enable them to have the freedom and power to make good decisions for themselves and their children. The talent of African-American mothers is that they can help their families survive and thrive in the face of adverse circumstances and insurmountable challenges even at the price of their own wellbeing.

Only a handful of mothers were uncritical of the Strong Black Woman archetype as an ideal to which to aspire. For example, Samantha was a married working mother and said that the idea of being a Strong Black Woman resonated with her. She acknowledged that in her household there was an unequal division of household and childcare responsibilities. She said,

I would agree with being a Strong Black Woman, my mom is kind of my role model for that... she had more resilience and strength than anybody... I think it can have negative connotations but when I think of myself I kind of think of it as being a supermom... There is this idea that you are a super woman in many ways because you have two full-time jobs. When you come home from work you are still working and my husband totally acknowledges that the division of responsibility in terms of raising the kids is probably 70/30 percent... If I need to stay up late I will to get it done and I think of those as being the characteristics of a strong black woman. As being a provider, nurturer and making sure your house is in order (2011).

Samantha saw taking on the duties of what Arlie Hochschild (1989) has described as the second shift, as what mothers do, and specifically those who are African American. For Samantha there was no need to rationalize this division of labor or obscure it by suggesting some division of duties that could be construed as more egalitarian. Embracing the example of her mother, a person she respected, admired and viewed as a Strong Black Woman, Samantha viewed her activities as what it took to be a competent employee and good mother. While Samantha acknowledged that balancing these responsibilities sometimes created conflict, she accepted all of these responsibilities as her own. Samantha's story suggest how performing the archetype of the Strong Black Woman may produce the unintended consequences of reproducing inequities in the gendered division of labor in the family. The archetype of the Strong Black Woman supports the view that women do it all because it diminishes their dependence on the men that may be in their lives. Samantha was invested in certain elements of this archetype because those elements supported her view that taking on the lion share of duties in her home was normal and unproblematic.

Having emotional resilience and strength in the face of a racist society was also a key characteristic of the Strong Black Woman. Charlene's mother encouraged her to be strong because she felt it would enable her to overcome experiences of racial discrimination that she would likely face in school and employment. Charlene said, "From the time that I was entering kindergarten I knew there would be times when I would have to be strong because I would encounter people who would automatically knock me down because I was black. If there was anything my mother instilled it me, it was that there were going to be times when I would have to be the strong black woman." Charlene believed that investing in practices related to the



archetype of the Strong Black Woman would ultimately enable her to excel in her life despite the racial discrimination she would likely encounter as she climbed the corporate ladder. By demanding that she be strong and emotionally resilient, the archetype of the Strong Black Woman encourages women to have the skills they will need to persevere and not let setbacks related to racism prevent them from accomplishing their goals. That might mean redoubling one's efforts in the workplaces and other arenas in life but these women can find solace in the fact that they are doing what is expected of them as Strong Black Women. Charlene's quote also underscores that the archetype of the Strong Black Woman demands that women engage in resistance against society.

Similarly, while Jordana acknowledged that having a professional career sometimes presented challenges in managing work and family demands, she also believed that being strong was an important characteristic to have as an adult woman, not just for herself, but also to serve as an example of strength to her daughter. She said, "I think it is important to role model for my daughter being a strong woman and being a career woman. Sometimes my job gets in the way with me being the type of mom I want to be but I think it is important for her to see that." When asked directly about her thoughts about the term the "Strong Black Woman" she said, "I think it is a good term. I think in certain settings strong black women are thought of as aggressive women and it is thought of negatively... to me it is a positive thing... it means unwavering values, goal oriented, tenacious, good things. You don't let situations prevent you from going after what is important." For Jordana the archetype of the Strong Black Woman was a symbolic resource that she and, in the future, her daughter could access when facing challenges in their lives. This archetype demands that women persevere in the face of obstacles to their success rather than give up. While being able to draw on this archetype as an internal battle cry of strength certainly serves a purpose, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2009) research cautions that internalizing emotions related to struggle and disappointment in the name of being a Strong Black Woman can have negative impacts on both the bodies and minds of African-American women.

### *Stay-at-Home Mothers Invested in the Strong Black Woman*

In some ways, given the cultural expectation that African-American mothers will work outside of the home and Strong Black Women can do it all, one might assume that identifying as a stay-at-home mother would necessarily preclude a mother from investing in the Strong Black Women archetype. My research reveals a more complicated story. For example, while approximately one third of my sample identified as stay at home mothers, almost half of these mothers actually engaged in part-time to full employment. Tamika, a married mother of one son, despite describing herself as a stay at home mother, worked 30 hours a week. In describing why she worked outside of the home she said:

I have three clients that I like. It is not a heck of a lot of money but it is enough where if I see something I want at the mall I can buy it. If I want to buy my kid a tricycle I don't have to say, 'Honey I need sixty bucks to get this bicycle.' I don't like that, I don't do that and I don't think my husband would be down with that, to be quite honest. I think he kind of digs that I am not the shrinking violet type (2009).



In other words, despite holding up the stay-at-home mother as the ideal, Tamika felt compelled to work outside of the home not only because she wanted to retain some economic independence but also because she thought her husband expected her to be her own woman financially. At the same time Tamika and her husband wanted her to be their child's primary childcare provider. Tamika's husband worked two full-time jobs to make staying at home and sending her son to preschool part-time financially viable. While Tamika acknowledged that her income did not pay for the big expenses in her household, by engaging in paid employment she was able to reconcile two competing cultural expectations- her need to be self-sufficient- "not the shrinking violet type" -with her need to be available to her son while he was young.

Sometimes a mother's employment history was not so clear-cut. For example, when Remi was raising her first two children she stayed at home with them for several years but, after she earned an advanced degree, she engaged in full-time employment while raising subsequent children. Before she returned to school to complete her degree Remi worked in her sons' preschool in exchange for reduced tuition. Despite being engaged in various forms of paid employment throughout her children's lives, Remi considered herself to be a stay-at-home mother because she remained available to her children during the day and after school. When Remi was not available to care for her children because she was taking a classes or working her husband or other family members cared for them. Because they remained in "family care" Remi did view this as time outside of the family. Describing her commitment to stay at home, she said "I have always been clear about motherhood, I didn't want anything to interfere with motherhood so I didn't want to have to go to class and leave him (2011)." Even when she returned to school and became a nurse her kids remained in the care of family. Remi said, "When I went back [to school], I went back as a part time student not a full time student. And I was working at the school that they went to, so I took evening classes. Right at the end of the day they would stay [at school] for a little while, like maybe two hours, while I was going to school and then their dad would pick them up." Currently, Remi worked between 30- 40 hours a week at night as a nurse, but insisted on seeing herself as a stay-at-home mother. Part of her explanation was that she always worked nights and this enabled her to ensure that her children were either at school or being cared for by herself, her husband or a long term and trusted friend whom she viewed like family. Remi, who was now in her second marriage, also underscored how her approach to combining work and motherhood was consistent with how she herself was raised. She said, "my husband] and I are very much like my grandparents (who raised Remi). My grandmother would work in the evening, I work at night, I don't work during the day and I only work on weekends so I work three days a week and I do that so I can be with them."

These quotes draw attention to how an interview participant's mothers approach to combining work and family influenced their approach. In some ways these mothers were making accommodations that were similar to those of white working- class mothers who may have wanted to conform to the cultural expectations of the cult of domesticity and the separate spheres ideology that they stay at home but whose financial circumstances prevented them from doing so. These African-American middle-class mothers were attempting to do something similar. While these mothers wanted to stay-at-home with their children they also felt a strong need to remain financially self-sufficient. Sometimes this need to work outside of the home was produced internally by a mothers' desire to retain some element of self-sufficiency and sometimes it was produced externally through financial need in their family, or from pressures



from family and community members.

I argue that these mothers' decision enabled them to reconcile two sets of cultural expectations of motherhood- the dominant ideals and the Strong Black Woman. The first set of expectations demands that mothers ensure that their children are cared for either by themselves or a trusted family member. The second set of cultural expectations demands that mothers retain their economic independence and sense of contribution to a broader community. To resolve these distinct expectations these mothers often sacrificed their sleep and engaged in paid labor that typically enabled them to be available to their children during the daytime hours and available to work in the evening. These mothers viewed their choices as something that mothers "just do." These mothers did not complain about their circumstances and they did not view their arrangement as a sacrifice - a key characteristic of the archetype of the Strong Black Woman.

### *Working Mothers: Critiquing the Strong Black Woman*

While some mothers invested in versions of the Strong Black Woman and believed that African-American women should be strong and resilient, the vast majority of mothers that I interviewed were also critical of this archetype of African-American womanhood. For example Rebecca was a single working mother with one son and she said:

They call me a strong black woman in the sense that I can do this, raise my son, be a parent, be a mother, do the things that need to be done, go to work everyday, come home cook dinner, make sure he gets his homework done, gets a bath, goes to bed, do all of those things um and still be okay, still be sane the next day. And, sometimes that is hard. It really is...it is a challenge. And sometimes I don't want to be strong. Sometimes I want to be weak (2011).

In Rebecca's description of her life in many ways she conformed to practices related to the archetype of the Strong Black Woman. She worked outside of the home but she was also the primary caregiver to her son. She saw her daily activities as nothing exceptional. She was merely doing what was necessary to provide for her son. She carried out these duties without complaint but admitted to me that sometimes she wished she didn't have to be strong. That she could let her guard down and show her weakness and let her true self be seen. In this case the archetype of Strong Black Woman and its related practices, discouraged Rebecca from publicly revealing a more nuanced version of herself as a mother and a woman. The Strong Black Woman encouraged her to masque the true version of herself that felt weak and sometimes needed help.

Mary also believed the Strong Black Woman was a problematic archetype. When she became a mother she left a lucrative six-figure career in business to stay at home with her children. Now a mother of two, she was probably the most critical of the archetype of the Strong Black Woman while simultaneously conforming to some of its characteristics. Before Mary met the man who would ultimately become her husband she began saving for the day she would get married and have children. For Mary it was important that she stay-at-home with her children but she assumed that it was unlikely that the African-American man she hoped to someday marry would have a large enough income to enable her stay-at-home. Mary came to this plan after



having made certain adjustments in her expectations for marriage and family. She said,

Along the way I had to make certain adjustments. For example, when I was thinking about getting married and having children, in my white picket fence the husband wasn't white. He also had a similar education level to me. And, in my white picket fence, no one else's children were there. For a while, I thought about whether I would be okay marrying a White man and I dated a few but I realized I wanted to be in a Black community (2009).

Mary ultimately married an African-American man who was a high-school graduate and earned less than half of her income. He also paid child support for a child from a previous marriage. However, despite the financial challenges that it presented, Mary carried out her plan to leave her job after she became a mother and used her savings so she could be a stay-at-home mother. Mary said she managed to stay-at-a home full-time for 3 years because of her savings but as a result of her shrinking reserves, she decided to find a temporary, part-time evening job to increase her family's income. She took this job because it enabled her to earn additional money while her children were in the care of her husband and to show her husband that she was willing to do anything for her family. She hoped her husband would respond by finding another job and, thus, enable her to stop working. Instead six months later Mary was still working. In fact, Mary had increased her work hours and her husband was not actively looking for additional income. Mary believed that her husband was comfortable with having her do it all- financially contributing and taking care of the family. This unbalanced distribution of work led Mary to begin negotiating a different division of household labor and she believed that the archetype of the Strong Black Woman presented a challenge in those negotiations.

Mary provided her own definition of what it means to be a Strong Black Woman while simultaneously identifying the challenges this archetype presented in her life and the lives of other mothers of color. She said,

One of the challenges that mothers of color face is our history of black women being the pillar in the family...I think the idea that we will provide the finances, do the childrearing, do the cooking and just do it all. If the man has married a strong black woman, he can end up not doing much of anything because the black woman is not going to let her family fail. Not going to let her marriage fail. She will do what it takes to hold it together and ... accept things from our men of color that maybe shouldn't be accepted. We have seen our parents do it and we have accepted this role but we need to reassess it because we can't go on like that forever and I think that you can't maintain happiness and balance if you are trying to do everything (2009).

Mary believed her husband was raised with certain expectations of what African-American women can and should be willing to do, and changing that was difficult. While Mary had begun to take on more financial responsibilities in her household she continued to suggest that her husband look for additional work. She also underscored how the idea that African-American women are strong and will do it all leads to, what she saw as, an unequal division of labor in the household. These quotes illustrate that, while, mothers conformed to certain practices related to the Strong Black Woman, many were also simultaneously critical of its influence in their lives.



These women pointed out how the Strong Black Women archetype influenced the choices they made in their own life and also how it shaped both African-American men's expectations of them as possessing extreme self-reliance and mainstream assumptions that African-American women should be able to do it all.

Similarly, Farah was married, worked outside of the home and was the mother of two daughters. She identified the SBW as an influence in her life and described how she at times conformed to some of its characteristics and defied its characteristics in other ways. One clear way that she rejected this archetype was in how she divided household duties; Farah was the primary breadwinner and her husband was a stay-at-home dad. Describing how her family reacted to her husband taking on the role of their daughters' primary caregiver she said,

Everybody has a problem with it. No one values it and we are just trying to keep our kids from feeling the same way. But my parents think that it is a waste- you know, you wasted all your talent on this man and he doesn't deserve it. He is nothing. He doesn't have a degree and he doesn't have a job... They don't understand that I couldn't work the way that I work if he wasn't as flexible. They would be much more comfortable with him working all day and us having our kids in childcare and neither one of us seeing them than what he does -stay at home (2009).

Farah said that this arrangement was the best for her family but she acknowledged that it was a struggle for both her and her husband to consistently and consciously choose to ignore negative comments and continue along the path they chose for themselves. Farah was not only challenging traditional notions of who should do what in the family but by having her husband be the primary childcare provider she was also rejecting the do-it-all expectations set by the Strong Black Woman archetype. While family and friends didn't understand why she would support a man, she saw the value in his labor inside of the home that enabled her to feel secure about the care her children received and comfortable working the long hours her job demanded.

#### *Stay at Home Mother: Critiquing the Strong Black Woman*

Some stay-at-home mothers who did not engaged in paid employment felt pressure from their spouses, family and community to work outside of the home. These mothers rejected the expectation that a duty of African-American motherhood was working outside of the home. Calliope was not married to father of her child and was currently staying at home. She said that she was hell bent on staying at home with her child until he was three and she finished getting her Master's degree. She described the opposition she received from her son's father stating:

He resents the fact that I have plans to stay-at-home with our son and go to school, and he feels that I should go to work. I feel that it is more beneficial for me to work on getting a Master's degree and then get a job that will help me raise our son instead of getting a job now that pays less with the BA that I have. And sacrificing my son's emotional and spiritual well-being. To get up and go to work everyday and work for somebody else, and to leave my son with some strange person that I don't know... No I don't think so (2009).



Calliope's son's father believed that she should work outside of home and this had created turmoil in their relationship. She attended a mothers' support group and described how many of the women were managing childcare and earning a living and she felt she should not have to do this even if she was not married to the father of her child. Calliope saw the challenges she faced choosing to stay-at-home with her child as challenges that were intrinsically related to dominant expectations and practices within the African-American community about motherhood. She said:

There's a certain pattern that happens with black males in relationships that I've seen where black women have to work. I think it's the fact that black men are not marrying black women and making families. Even if they say they'll respect my child and co-parent, the woman still has to work, because unless you're paying a hell of a lot of child support, the woman still has to work and pay rent. Until that breakdown in the family unit is healed and addressed, a lot of black women are going to have to work (2009).

Thus for Calliope her perception that African-American mothers generally work outside of home was directly related to the practices and expectations of African-American men. Nonetheless she saw her own beliefs and practices as diverging from those that are common in the African-American community overall, not just among men.

Similarly, Rochelle, a stay-at-home mother of three, also faced stigma from her family and community for her decision to stay-at-home. Rochelle thought if she worked outside of the home she would be more stressed and less able to be there for her children. In making the choice to stay at home she said few people in her immediate community approved of her decision and often made remarks that she was doing nothing all day long or assumed she would be free to run errands for them. Rochelle said,

My in-laws feel that I should work- they make those sorts of comments... like my husband wouldn't have to work so hard, if you guys worked together and you got a job. Or they say things like he works so hard because you like to go shopping. I have responded that "it is not about me going shopping but that I think it is important that I be home with my children...it is difficult to balance working and taking care of my children, particularly when my husband is not around. My children enjoy that I am at home with them".... If I had to work full-time I would probably be depressed and resentful (2009).

Rochelle sought out a group of stay-at-home mothers who were African-American middle-class mothers because she felt she needed that kind of support from like-minded people in her community. Several of the stay-at-home mothers distanced themselves from the archetype of the Strong Black Woman and deliberately sought out groups of other stay-at-home mothers of color who validated their decision to opt out of working outside of the home. This validation was not something these mothers could get from white middle-class stay-at-home mothers' groups. While white middle-class mothers might share some of their motivations for staying at home the African-American middle-class mothers in my sample believed that these mothers would not understand the shifting racial sands that they were contending with in making the decision to stay-at-home.



This need for organized support for African-American stay-at-home mothers of color was not unique to Rochelle. Indeed, in the late 90s, an organization for African-American stay-at-home mothers was founded called African-American Mothers United.<sup>7</sup> One of the specific goals of this organization was to connect stay-at-home African-American mothers with each other and help them feel “good about their choices” related to work and family. This organization was specifically concerned with providing support to African-American mothers who made the choice to reduce their commitment to paid work in favor of focusing on raising their *own* children. This emphasis on raising one’s own children refers back to a history of African-American mothers working as domestics and nannies in white middle and working class families. Since the creation of African-American Mothers United the organization has grown in size and has expanded to over 100 chapters nation-wide. Each chapter must be comprised of at least five mothers and according to organizational guidelines, no more that one 1/5 of the membership can be employed full-time. The goals of this organization are to recognize and valorize the history of African-American mothers as members of the workforce and to offset the prevailing expectation that African-American mothers will work outside of the home. Its goals are also to connect stay-at-home mothers of color to each other so they will feel supported in their decision to stay-at-home or reduce their commitment to paid work and be connected to a community of like minded mothers. This organization was founded based upon the explicit recognition that for African-American mothers there are different assumptions about how they will manage work and family. While the decision to work may often be based on economic need, African-American Mothers United highlights that African-American mothers often lack the community support for their decisions to stay at home as well.

Sharon Hays writes about stay-at-home mother creating communities of like-minded mothers who support their decision to focus on raising their children and forgo paid employment. In some ways the women who created African-American Mothers United and the mothers from my sample that sought out similar groups are similar to those stay-at-home mothers who are trying to find like-minded mothers. However the ideological and support work that these mothers are doing in these groups is different. The mothers in my sample felt like they were going against the expectations of the African-American community by forgoing the additional income that employment could provide. Sometimes they were also disappointing their children’s grandparents who thought they would be more involved and have a more instrumental role in their grandchildren’s lives.

Many of the stay-at-home mothers I interviewed echoed the need for the kind of support that an organization like African-American Mothers United sought to provide to its members. Indeed, a majority of the stay-at-home mothers that I interviewed were active members of African-American stay-at-home mothers’ organizations like African-American Mothers United. These mothers described the resistance they faced when they made the decision to not work outside of the home or to reduce their commitments to paid work. Some stay at home mothers reported feeling pressure to work in the form of frequent comments from relatives pondering what they did during the day or direct questions about when they might return to work or go back to school.

They also highlighted how linking up with other stay-at-home African-American middle-

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<sup>7</sup> Name of organization changed.



class mothers supported their choice when it might not be supported by spouses and family and community members. In addition, for these mothers, joining a mainstream mothers' group was not sufficient, they sought out a racially specific mothers' group that would have greater understanding of the race related issues they would face as stay-at-home moms and in raising their children. Sarah, a mother of two, who identified as a stay-at-home mother despite working approximately fifteen hours a week, described the support she received from joining an African-American stay-at-home mothers' support group. She said,

What we all share in common is trying to maximize the time we spend with our children. Even the career women stay at home for 8 months and they try to maximize their time with their children. It definitely is important to me because I definitely know a lot of women who are more career women and who don't have kids and I don't know a lot of people who think being a stay-at-home mom is a good thing to be. I think a lot people think- what are you doing all day? They don't realize you are busting your ass all day. Taking care of a child is work that is why they are called childcare workers- because it is work. For me, for my self-esteem, it has been important to be connected to other women who believe that it is an important thing. It is okay. And in fact it is important to be with your child (2009).

For these African-American middle-class mothers making the choice to stay-at-home was not something that was readily accepted by their communities. In addition, finding other middle-class African-American mothers that shared both their experience and orientation to motherhood was extremely challenging. Half (approximately fifteen percent of the total sample) of the mothers identifying as staying-at-home were not engaged in any form of work outside of the home. Of those mothers only a minority were not pressured to return to paid employment. These mothers believed that by staying at home they were going against the cultural expectations of what was considered normal behavior for African-American mothers. However, by seeking support from those who shared their experiences, these mothers were revisiting the strategies of self-definition and valuation that Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has identified as essential to the survival of African-American women and families.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from my research underscore the social construction of alternative contemporary versions of womanhood and motherhood. While African-American middle-class mothers might be construed as an interesting deviation from the norm, I would argue that as a case these mothers would be more fruitfully used as a spotlight on the taken-for-granted principles that guide discussions about work and family conflict. This chapter suggests that the frameworks of mothering and parenting that dominate family and work life scholarship are supported by racially situated cultural expectations and practices that have not been fully considered. These ideologies are also supported by specific economic, cultural and social configurations of work, mothering and the family that are assumed to be shared by all mothers and their families. My research shows how differences in these configurations matter. These configurations include African-American women's longstanding position within the labor market and examples of working mothers who strive to be economically self-reliant.



African-American middle-class mothers also interact with mainstream society and are confronted by stereotypes that they must challenge in order to be fully recognized as middle-class mothers and feel comfortable participating in middle-class childrearing settings. The mothers in my sample often believed that they were assumed to be poor, uneducated or single mothers and thus developed strategies for challenging these assumptions, while not calling attention to the fact that they were doing so. These mothers believe that being misrecognized as poor and on welfare had practical consequences in their lives and the lives of their children. In addition, stay-at-home mothers felt a heightened need to dispel these assumptions because they believed many people thought they were only able to stay-at-home because they received welfare. These stay-at-home mothers also contended with assumptions within the African-American community that they were not living up to certain cultural expectations of the Strong Black Woman. Ironically, however, many of these mothers were, in part, choosing to stay-at-home to raise their children in response to the historical inability of women of color to do so in the past. These mothers considered raising their own children to be important and a privilege that historically many African-American mothers were unable to do because they had to earn money raising the children of white families.

This research also demonstrates that African-American middle-class mothers are in a curious cultural and structural predicament. On the one hand, African-American middle-class mothers are often expected or assumed to work outside of the home by their families and communities, thereby fulfilling the archetype of the Strong Black Woman that is grounded in their own lived experience and serves as a source of empowerment. On the other hand, the ideal of the Strong Black Woman can be equally limiting particularly given the increasing options some African-American mothers have with respect to work and family. While the mothers in my sample to varying degrees invested in the archetype of the Strong Black Womanhood most were simultaneously critical of it. While the image of strength or the Strong Black Woman has historically been used as a symbolic resource to combat the adversity mothers faced in their lives, some African-American middle-class mothers have experienced this ideal as an obstacle when negotiating changes within the division of labor in their families. Indeed, it may present challenges to enacting different versions of womanhood that may be perceived as weak and not authentically African-American. The third of my sample that represented stay-at-home mothers seemed to be engaging in a new period of self-definition that may result in an expansion of the archetypes of African American womanhood and motherhood.

Ultimately, four competing cultural expectations of womanhood and motherhood framed the decisions that African-American middle-class mothers made regarding work and family. The first two expectations were that on the one hand mothers are assumed to demonstrate their devotion to family by allotting most of their time to their home and children but on the other hand, African-American mothers were assumed to work outside of the home and in doing so demonstrated their commitment to taking care of their family. While it often goes unspoken, the first two of these expectations is not just associated with class status but also racial identity. The second two expectations are related to the archetypes of the Strong Black Woman and the Welfare Queen. On the one hand, African-American mothers are encouraged to embody the spirit of blues songstress Christine Kitrell's, "I'm A Woman". This was a song that was later popularized in the Enjoli perfume commercials of the 80s describing a woman who "can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan and never let you forget you're a man." On the other hand,



African-American middle-class mothers are supposed to distance themselves from the women who are unable to do embody this spirit- Welfare Queens. To reconcile these different expectations, African-American middle-class mothers, both working and stay at home, must constantly perform a certain classed and raced subjectivity that is never fully accomplished or complete.



## Chapter Four:

### **Cultivating Consciousness: Crossing, Policing and Transcending Raced, Classed and Gendered Borders**

In 1962 E. Franklin Frazier published his landmark study, *Black Bourgeoisie*, which provided an analysis of the emerging and expanding African-American middle class. Frazier lamented that members of the African-American middle class were increasingly rejecting African-American culture and instead seeking to emulate a white society that refused to embrace them. Ultimately Frazier concluded his analysis with a cautionary prediction regarding the fate of the African-American middle class, arguing “The *black bourgeoisie* suffers from 'nothingness' because when Negroes attain middle-class status their lives generally lose both content and significance (Frazier 1962 pg. 278).” He predicted that the trajectory of the African-American middle class would ultimately result in it lacking both an economic and a cultural base, and thus members of the African-American middle class were in the process of becoming “nobody” (Frazier 1962).

While many scholars have allayed Frazier’s concerns and have demonstrated that African-Americans, even those who are middle class, continue to identify along racial lines, more recently, research has suggested that some members of the African-American middle-class identify more strongly with their class identity than their racial identity. In this chapter I revisit Frazier’s cautionary prediction using the case of African-American middle-class mothers and their conceptualizations of African-American middle-class identity for their children. I focus on mothers because they are typically considered the conduits of socialization in our society, and among African Americans, mothers are more likely to be single and thus principally responsible for decisions related to their children’s educational, social and cultural resources and experiences.

In addition to examining the state of African-American middle-class identity in the contemporary era, my data expands on and revises scholarship examining how middle-class families parent their children. Existing research suggests that socioeconomic status generally trumps racial identity in its importance in influencing how parents raise their children. In addition, scholars argue that middle-class parents use a common approach when parenting their children (Lareau 2003). Annette Lareau has called this approach, “concerted cultivation” and she says it emphasizes 1) encouraging children’s logical reasoning, 2) developing children’s intellectual and physical skills through organized enrichment activities and 3) viewing educational and other institutions in society from an entitlements and service-oriented perspective (Lareau 2003). My findings identify additional concerns related to racial identity and gender that African-American middle-class mothers have for their children and how those concerns influence how they parent their children.

The African-American middle-class mothers in my sample worked to create racially comfortable environments for their children that sheltered them from early experiences of racism and protected their racial self-esteem. These mothers were concerned with helping their children navigate a diverse world by helping their children to develop the skills to interact with a range of people from different backgrounds. They were also concerned with fostering one of three



specific versions of racial and class-based identities for their children, and these identities were influenced by their own socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. These three orientations to identity required distinct relationships to the African-American and the mainstream community.

While managing class distinctions dominated mothers' concerns regarding their children's racial identity within the African-American community, in conceptualizing their children's identity in the mainstream, mothers' efforts were primarily marked by concerns related to differences in how their children would be received based on their gender. While mothers had more generalized concerns about racism they were also concerned with how racial identity in conjunction with gender determined their children's treatment in mainstream society. Overall, mothers were primarily concerned with managing the safety of their sons and the self-esteem of their daughters. In addition, a mother's orientation to managing these challenges related to the intersections of racial identity and gender was associated with the type of identity she was seeking to foster in her children.

It is important to note that the interviews for this research took place in the aftermath of Oscar Grant's fatal shooting in Oakland, California. During this incident Grant, an unarmed African-American male teenager, was shot by Johannes Mehserle, a white Bay Area Rapid Transit police officer in the back while laying face down on a train platform and being subdued by several other officers. For many African Americans from all socioeconomic backgrounds, but specifically the mothers that I interviewed, Grant's death served as yet another reminder and confirmation of the different experiences that their sons have when engaging with law enforcement than those of the sons of other racial and ethnic groups. It also underscored that they would have to teach their children, but specifically their sons, how to interact with law enforcement and leave those interactions unscathed. The mothers in my sample questioned whether their sons would be received as good kids from good middle-class families or as threats to public safety. Ultimately, I argue that for African-American middle-class mothers, parenting their children is as much about cultivating specific versions of racial and gender identity as it is about cultivating a specific version of class identity.

## **Literature Review**

Writing in 1962, E. Franklin Frazier predicted that as African-Americans became middle class they would reject their own culture and adopt mainstream white culture as their own. He argued that African Americans' desire to assimilate was misguided because they would never be accepted into white mainstream society. Despite Frazier's concerns, historically, members of the African Diaspora from all socioeconomic background have more strongly identified with their racial background than other forms of identity such as class, religion or gender (Dawson 2001). However more recently two main perspectives on African-American middle-class identity have been presented in the literature. On the one hand scholarship suggest that African Americans as a group primarily identify based on their racial identity. Michael Dawson (2001) suggests this may be because African Americans have historically viewed their fates as linked to each other regardless of economic position. Other scholars have also suggested that African Americans' persistent racial identification is largely because society has given them no other choice but to identify as a racial group (Waters 2000). These scholars point to both internal factors that link



African Americans within their communities across class and external factors in the mainstream that prevent African Americans from identifying in other ways.

On the other hand scholars suggest that middle-class African Americans may have increasingly diverse ways of identifying. Members of the African-American middle class have increasingly had access to a wider range of educational, social, occupational and residential opportunities that have been previously unavailable to them (Patillo-McCoy 1999, Lacy 2007). For example research conducted by Karyn Lacy (2007) in the DC area, suggest that some members of the African-American middle class choose to emphasize class-centric, race-centric or racially infused class-centric identities, depending on the context. Indeed, a recent report by the Pew Charitable Trust Foundation revealed that close to 40% of African Americans believe that African Americans can no longer be thought of as a single race, identifying an increasing difference in the values of middle-class and poor African Americans as the explanation (Taylor et al. 2007). This research provides additional evidence that African Americans increasingly believe that, rather than identifying as “just black,” they have a broader set of identities defined by both economic and racial status to choose from.

Within the literature on middle-class parenting scholars have also suggested that for African-American middle-class families, class may be a more salient mode of identifying than racial identity, at least in terms of how they approach parenting their children. In her research on class reproduction, Annette Lareau argues that both African-American and White middle-class parents engage in “concerted cultivation” when raising their children. This approach to parenting encourages logical reasoning and organized intellectual and physical enrichment activities for children. In addition, parents and children have a entitlements and service-oriented view of educational and other dominant institutions within society. While Lareau acknowledges that African-American middle-class parents often employ additional strategies beyond those discussed in her core findings (Lareau 2003; Lareau and Weinberger 2003), her research largely ignores the impact of racial identity on a parents’ underlying motivations and concerns for their children and how and why parenting strategies differ based on racial identity. In addition, despite acknowledging divisions related to racial identity and gender in American society, Lareau assumes that individuals who acquire certain markers of middle-class status, such as a college education or homeownership, have life trajectories that are predominantly defined by those markers of middle-class status (2003).

Lareau’s findings have been criticized for taking an additive approach to analyzing race, class and gender (Choo and Ferree 2010). Indeed, her research does not consider the extent to which concerns related to racial identity and class, together impact the parenting decisions of African-American middle-class mothers. Also, because whiteness is often an unmarked category, she overlooks how racial identity shapes the parenting concerns and strategies of white parents. Scholarship on race and ethnicity has shown that African-American middle-class parents are cognizant of the racism that their children will likely face in their daily lives and view giving their children the skills to proactively cope with and address racism as part of their essential parenting duties (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Tatum 1999). For example, African-American middle-class parents often begin addressing race related issues during their children’s infant and toddler years (Feagin and Sikes 1994). African-American middle-class mothers are often parenting their children in environments in which they and their families are minorities based on their racial



identity and/or their socioeconomic status (Tatum 1999, Patillo-McCoy 1999, Lacy 2007). In addition, many African-American middle-class mothers were on the front lines of integrating white schools as children and had first-hand experiences with racism and sexism (Higginbotham 2001). Based on these experiences and concerns, African-American middle-class mothers may have developed distinct views about how to best parent their children and prepare them for a world that may greet them with some degree of hostility and assumed inferiority (Hughes and Johnson 2001).

Scholars have also demonstrated that the markers of middle-class status that Lareau highlights in her research are not accompanied by the same material benefits across racial groupings (Oliver and Shapiro 1997, Patillo-McCoy 1999). African-American middle-class parents are more likely to have been raised in poor and working-class families and have achieved their middle-class status through socioeconomic mobility. Children raised in middle-class African-American families are significantly more likely to experience downward mobility as adults than are their white counterparts (Sharkey 2009). Thus, while African-American middle-class parents may share certain approaches to parenting with white middle-class parents, there is good reason to suspect that there may be other strategies they use to parent their children to address the race-related challenges they may face. In addition, given that many members of the middle class have achieved that status through upward mobility, research on how African-Americans middle-class mothers conceptualize and reproduce middle-class status for their children can also be viewed as how a group of people with newly gained middle-class status works to retain that status for the next generation.

In addition to preparing their children to address challenges related to their racial identity research has consistently demonstrated that African-American children are treated differently based on their gender by major institutions within society such as schools (Ferguson 2001; Pascoe 2007; Morris 2005), law enforcement (Brunson and Miller 2006) and the workplace (Bertrand and Mullainathan. 2004; Grodsky and Pager 2001; Pager 2003). Scholars have documented that African-American boys routinely face harsher disciplinary treatment in the school system because they are more often labeled aggressive and violent (Ferguson 2001; Pascoe 2007; Morris 2005). African-American girls are also confronted with different and negative assumptions about their behavior including being viewed as aggressive, sassy or unladylike (Morris 2007; Morris 2005; Ferguson 2001). Although scholars have found that African-American families generally ascribe to more liberal gender ideologies and make fewer gender differences when raising their children (Hill 2001, 2002), little research has examined how African-American parents prepare their children for the treatment they may face by the mainstream that may vary based on their gender. Thus examining how intersections of racial identity, class and gender interact to produce different life experiences, challenges and coping strategies for children is critically important in the context of African-American middle-class parenting. Building on existing critiques of the scholarship on middle-class parenting, my findings show how approaches to parenting are influenced by concerns and aspirations related to intersections of racial identity, gender and class. While the African-American middle-class mothers in my sample exhibited many of the strategies associated with concerted cultivation, their motivations for using certain strategies were often influenced by a desire to address race-related issues that their children would likely encounter.



The remainder of this chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I describe how mothers sought to ensure their children's racial comfort by balancing academic rankings of school with a school's racial demographics, discussing race and racism with teachers and childcare providers and creating racially supportive peer groups for their children. The second section examines how mothers sought to foster both a middle-class and African-American identity in their children. Overall the African-American middle-class mothers in my sample shared a racially conscious approach to parenting but how they implemented that approach varied. I describe three distinct race and class based identities that different mothers sought to foster in their children. These versions of middle-class racial identity emerged from my interviews and I have labeled them "Border Crossing," "Border Policing" and "Border Transcending" (described in more detail below). Finally in section three, I describe how these orientations to identity were associated with specific approaches to addressing gender related challenges that mothers believed their daughters and sons would face. Notably, while each group of mothers had a distinct and dominant approach to addressing challenges related to intersections of racial identity and gender they believed their children would face, these mothers actually shared a common view of what those challenges would be. For daughters the main challenge was self-esteem and for sons the main concern was safety. One mother summed up this sentiment by saying, "To be a black girl can be difficult, but to be a black boy can be deadly." This statement underscored how gender combined with racial identity to impact the concerns mothers had for their children both in the African-American community and the mainstream community.

### **Ensuring Racial Comfort**

Middle class status is assumed to come with certain privileges but for African-American mothers, their children and their families, these privileges are mediated through their racial identity. African-American middle-class mothers recognize that racial identity is the primary category through which they and their children are viewed and they must work to make their other demographic categories visible to others. These mothers understood that despite their middle-class status, their children might still be marked by mainstream society as poor, uneducated and criminals. While they believed that ideally their children's middle-class status should largely ensconce them within a realm of safety that included good schools, an abundance of educational resources and protected them from harsh treatment from police, teachers and in everyday social interactions, the reality was that being African American destabilized and largely diminished their access to these realms of safety. Thus, as mothers, they believed they had to prepare their children for the racialized ways they would be received by the wider society. While the African-American middle-class mothers I interviewed employed strategies that middle-class mother of other racial groups might in raising their children, there were additional strategies that these mothers utilized to address the race and class specific challenges their children would face. The mothers in my research sought to ensure the racial comfort of their children and this concern was woven into their searches for childcare, schools and extracurricular activities. Indeed, mothers viewed their children's racial comfort as equally important to other factors such as a school's track record for academic achievement or other benefits of proposed enrichment activities.

Law and society scholar Linda Hamilton Kreiger (1995) has argued that the way the law understands discrimination is fundamentally flawed. The imagined culprit is a person who is



fueled by racist beliefs about specific groups who intentionally discriminates against members of those groups. In reality prejudice works by shaping how we view a person's behaviors (Kreiger 1995). A loud white boy is viewed as animated and outgoing; a loud black boy is viewed as aggressive and disruptive. A young white girl imitating the latest dance video moves is considered cute and artistic and a young black girl doing the same thing is considered to be sassy or sexual (Ferguson 2001). Many scholars believe that this hidden bias or subtle discrimination has largely supplanted the explicit racism of the 60s, 70s, and 80s in educational and occupational environments. It is both the kind of discrimination that is largely left unchecked by legal redress and the sort that African-American mothers are primarily concerned with safeguarding their children from and preparing their children to address. These mothers believed that their children needed to learn how to identify and respond to subtle forms of discrimination that they would likely face and might that hinder them from leading successful middle-class lives. Yet in teaching these strategies to their children, these mothers consistently emphasized the desire to protect the "spirit" of their children- their children's racial identity and racial self-esteem. These mothers sought to provide their children with an understanding of what discrimination looked like without cultivating a negative racial self-image in their children.

Sharon poignantly described what many other mothers said in different words, "Each time a black boy has a racially charged interaction with a police officer, teacher, or shop owner those experiences will gradually start to eat at his self-worth and damage his spirit until he might become so damaged that he starts to believe and enact the person he is expected to be rather than who he truly is as a person (2010)." Thus, while mothers wanted their children to be aware of racism and prejudice, they did not want their children to internalize the ways they are viewed by some members of mainstream society. Rachel explained that in teaching her son about what it means to be an African-American man in this country, she wanted to ensure that he did not grow up "with the black man chip on the shoulder. Feeling we are weak. Whites have done something to us. We can't do something because of white people. I want him to understand racism is a reality so when stuff comes up we can deal with it but I don't want him to go around looking for problems." For these mothers it was important that their children have the skills to recognize racism and feel validated in those experiences but it was equally important that they communicate to their children that racism was not a legitimate excuse not to succeed. These mothers walked a tight-rope between providing their children with the skills to navigate negative images of African-Americans while not validating those images; between raising children who would be able to recognize explicit and subtle forms of racism but not develop a chip on their shoulders or use discrimination as an justification for not working hard. As Lauren put it she was trying to give her child the "History without the pain. Educating our kids without giving them the baggage."

To escape early attacks on their children's spirit, mothers carefully screened their childcare providers for racism and selected childcare providers that had both diverse student populations and diverse teachers as well. Mothers also had explicit conversations about issues related to racial identity and racism with teachers and other childcare providers to prevent their children from experiencing racism. Recounting how she made choices about caregivers, Nia described the importance of her caregivers being comfortable talking about race and racism. She said:



When I'm interviewing I bring up race, like what are your thoughts on racism, you know, because that is important. In our family, my husband and I, we eat racism for breakfast. We talk about racism and race, and we think about it a lot. That is the lens from which we see a lot of things. And it's hard, like sometimes you just want to take off your race lens for a second and just be a human being. But we can't do that, you know. So, we can't have someone here that doesn't have that certain lens or is not willing to look at that lens, and maybe even change their lens, you know (2009).

For Nia the basic qualifications for childcare providers and educators not only included their ability to care for and educate her children but also included demonstrations of their sensitivity to and acumen in addressing issues related to race and racism. Similarly, Maya, an educator and a mother of four, described her strategic use of childcare providers to ensure that her children were encouraged to embrace the proper racial consciousness. She said,

I'm moving my son out of his current daycare after his birthday and putting him back with a childcare provider who runs a family daycare in west Oakland because I want him to have this little bit of African-American ideology and an older black woman love before I send him to a private and predominantly white school in Berkeley. I want him to go to that school and have the experience where he is two and can look at a map and say Oh Africa. I think it is important to go into the world with that grounding. And all of my children have had that. They have all gone to this woman in their preschool years (2009).

Both these mothers felt it was critical that their children had a strong foundation in their history as African Americans and be skilled in viewing the world through the lens of race. These mothers felt that if their children did not have this grounding they would be disadvantaged as African Americans in mainstream society. In selecting childcare, some working mothers indicated that they preferred their children to be cared for by family members in order to avoid early injuries to their children's racial self-esteem. In addition, some stay-at-home mothers said that their fear of potential racial slights from caregivers factored into their decision not work. Thus the need for racial sensitivity and racial safety was woven into these mothers' parenting decisions.

Overall the mothers I interviewed underscored that the categories that they felt were important were somewhat distinct to those of white mothers. For example, Meera, a stay-at-home mother of two, said she believed that African-American and white mothers used different decision-making criteria about how to best raise their children. She developed this belief through her experiences attending two different mother's groups- one comprised of primarily white middle-class mothers and the other comprised entirely of African-American middle-class mothers. She said,

I attended [a white moms' group] and I would just sit there and feel like their world was completely different. There were a lot of things that they wouldn't talk about. It was a class issue or a race issue. I feel like a lot of the moms were rich. Like they were staying at home AND they had nannies....I wouldn't want to get super personal with that group whereas with the other Black moms' groups we could talk about anything. From sex to, you know, anything, you know like what is going on now, and the differences in our



bodies, money, and education. We talked a lot about education and preschools and stuff and sometimes both. The white moms' group... would have different priorities when it came to education. Talking about places that I would never send my kids. Or neighborhoods I would never live in. Like Montclair or places like Piedmont. And I would think, I am not going to send my children through a school in Piedmont that is all white or something. And so there wasn't a lot of relating there (2009).

For Meera, the racial comfort of her children was an important factor influencing her decisions related to their educational, social and residential environments. Piedmont and Montclair are both middle to upper-middle class, predominately white neighborhoods with public schools that have access to better resources and have records of high academic performance. It would not be unreasonable to think that any middle-class mother would be eager to have her children attend a public school in these neighborhoods and live in one of these neighborhoods in order to further cement their children as members of the middle class. However Meera was less than enthusiastic about the prospect of her children attending a school or living in one of these neighborhoods because her children would be racially isolated. This was a sentiment that was shared by many mothers that I interviewed. For Meera, like other mothers, the racial comfort of her children was an important factor in parenting decisions- a factor she believed was not explicitly considered by white mothers.

Often when the mothers I interviewed enrolled their children in school they tried to ensure the racial comfort of their children by balancing academic rankings of school with a school's racial demographics. Karlyn expressed the time-consuming process through which she picked her son's current school. Her decision ultimately involved compromises between test scores and the racial diversity of the student body, teachers and school administrators. She said:

Most of the schools in San Francisco that have great test scores are 50 percent White, 50 percent Asian-probably more Asian now and 1 percent Black 1 percent Latino. So I did a lot of research before I chose this school. Their school is maybe 30 percent white, 30 percent Asian, 10 percent Black, 9 percent Latino. So you know, instead of like never seeing another Black kid in their school they will probably have at least another one in their classroom. Which is one of the reasons, in addition to the fact that they have great test scores, that I choose that school and felt that it would be a good fit for our family. But you know they don't see any Black teachers there (2010).

Karlyn did a careful study of the racial demographics of students, teachers and administrators of high academic achieving schools to find the one that would work best for her son. Ultimately she didn't get everything on her "wish list" but she felt that the school her son now attended was the best choice among the existing options for her family. For many mothers, the fact that their children would be one of few African-American students in a predominately white school outweighed a school's record for high academic achievement. A lack of African Americans in teaching and administrative positions also was a red-flag. Instead, these mothers sought out schools with a balance of academic achievement and racial and socioeconomic diversity.

Concerns about the level of diversity in the classroom and school administration started for mothers when their children were still very young. Maya demonstrated this through relaying



a series of discussions she had with colleagues when she was deciding where she would send her daughter to preschool. She described visiting a preschool that had been highly recommended by several white colleagues who also had preschool-aged children and had been described as somewhat diverse. During the school tour she noticed that while there were two Asian students the remainder were white. The day after the visit her colleagues greeted her saying, “don’t you think the school is great?” She raised the issue of the diversity and the colleagues responded saying that there was some diversity at the school. She responded and said it did seem like a great school but thought to herself, “for their children.” Ultimately, Maya enrolled her child in a more diverse preschool that was not as highly regarded by her colleagues. For Maya, having a high rating in terms of academic excellence could not overcome her concerns about her daughter being the only African-American student in the classroom. She feared her daughter would feel isolated and she wanted her daughter to experience school as a racially comfortable environment.

Mothers also sought to ensure the racial comfort of their children by working to create peer groups of other African-American children from like-minded families. Sarah described why striving for racial comfort was so important in her description of a discussion she had in an African-American mothers’ group. She said, “one of the things we have talked about in these mothers’ groups are some of the challenges that we face and that we believe our children are going to face and how we can prepare them better. So, whether it is, I’m the only black girl in the school or someone is wondering why my hair is curly or telling me I look like a monkey because it doesn’t straighten like theirs, they are prepared.” Sarah believed the friendships her children were forming with other African-American kids would help them navigate prospective assaults on their self-esteem. These mothers often saw their decision to join a specific mothers’ group as creating a community of African-American mothers for themselves and African-American peers to which their children would be exposed to regularly. They wanted to create peer groups for their children that would be racially comfortable spaces. Christine explained

I want my son to be around black people. We have wonderful neighbors and friends who are white. And I have to say I really wanted this since being pregnant because I really didn’t have any other black mother friends who had kids the same age. I really want my son to be around black folks and so I have gone out of my way to find black mothers and I make sure to see them frequently so he has black playmates (2010).

A largely unspoken assumption among the mothers I interviewed was that white middle-class mothers did not have to put the same amount of energy and thought into creating peer groups for their children. In addition, given the increasingly dispersed nature of the African-American middle-class community in the Bay Area, these peer groups had to be consciously constructed and continually fostered.

### **Fostering Racial and Class-Based Identities**

The African-American middle-class mothers in my sample felt it was important to foster specific racial and class inflected identities in their children that I refer to as “Border Crossing,” “Border Policing” and Border Transcending. ” Each of these versions of African-American middle-class identity required different approaches to building community for their children. My data also suggest that a mother’s racial and class background influenced the version of African-



American middle-class identity that she encouraged in her children. Specifically, the length of time a mother's family had been middle class influenced the identity she sought to foster in her children and the kind of connections she wanted her children to have to the African-American and mainstream community.

### *Border Crossing Mothers*

Mothers who sought to foster a Border Crossing identity in their children wanted them to be fluent in the whole range of African-American culture and community and fluent in cultures of privilege. These mothers, comprising approximately one third of my sample, viewed African-American racial identity as strongly connected to understanding socioeconomic struggle and possessing "street smarts." They wanted their children to have an authentic and natural connection to all African Americans. In practice this meant their children needed to understand economic struggle and be at ease in environments with other African-Americans who had not been afforded the same residential, educational, and/or economic opportunities. This also meant feeling comfortable in poor African-American neighborhoods, often with higher crime rates.

Nia,<sup>8</sup> a married mother of two who worked full-time as an educational administrator, highlighted her desire that her sons be able to interact with a wide variety of African Americans who were both poor and economically well off. Responding to a question about how she wanted her children to relate to the broader African-American community, Nia said:

I want my children to be well-rounded. I want them to be cool. I want them to be able to interact with a lot of different people and in a lot of different situations. In particular, I want them to be able to interact with black people- all kinds of black people. And, not be scared or intimidated or feel like they're not black enough or, in situations with whites not feel comfortable or sure how to act (2009).

Nia described a strong desire for her children to be able to interact with many types of people. She believed that her sons needed to be able to navigate a broad range of situations including arenas of privilege and poverty. Specifically, she wanted her children to feel at ease in their interactions with whites and African Americans from different class backgrounds. In practical terms this meant that in certain situations her children might need to adjust their behavior to fit in with different racial and class groups so that they and others around them would be more comfortable.

Similarly Maya, a married, working mother of four children, responding to the same question, highlighted a similar sentiment that her children be conversant in arenas of privilege (often interpreted as White) and poverty (often interpreted as African-American). She said:

If you are a black person in the world and you don't know your history and you don't know your community and can't go into West Oakland (a poor and high-crime neighborhood) and walk from block A to block B without being all nervous and scared, you are handicapped.... There is a sense of power in knowing that you can go anyplace in the world and you are not scared of the hood. That it is not this kind of mysterious and



dark place and you can handle yourself in lot of different kinds of situations. I think that is kind of related to how you manage yourself in the world. So like most of the kids have all spent some time in Berkeley public schools, which are both integrated and segregated all at the same time. There is very much a vibe of the white kids from the hills [an affluent area] and the black kids from the flatlands [a lower income area]. So there are the ghetto black kids and the privileged white kids and I want my kids to be able to hang with both and, again I see this as being related to self esteem, self confidence and just humanity. There is something about being able to recognize the humanity behind all of those different configurations and presentations of self that I think is really important (2009).

Maya's quote underscores that her children need to be comfortable and at ease navigating a wide range of environments to which white middle-class children would not typically encounter. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to assume that most white middle-class mothers, and middle-class mothers overall, would be more concerned with their children avoiding, rather than being comfortable, walking around an area with a high crime rate. But Maya, and other Border Crossing mothers like her, believed this was a skill set that their children needed and that its absence would be a hindrance to them as African Americans. In addition, by identifying that the high school her children attended was both integrated in terms of the actual percentages of different racial groups, and segregated in terms of social groupings within the school, Maya demonstrated that the ability to shift or code-switch was not only important as her children moved from one geographic location to another, but would also enable them to fit in and thrive within their current school environment. These mothers wanted their children to be able to navigate and engage with the African-American and white social groups within their schools. In addition, this skill-set was considered necessary for her children as they moved throughout their lives based on the assumption that their professional and personal social circles would continue to be socio-economically and racially diverse, albeit at times in segregated ways. For both Nia and Maja it was important that their children be fluent in the language and culture of mainstream and African-American communities. Border Crossing mothers wanted their children to be able to navigate and engage with the African-American and White social groups within their schools and throughout their lives.

Echoing the need for their children to fit into a variety of peer groups (and specifically a range of African-American peer groups), mothers who worked to foster a Border Crossing identity in their children voiced concerns that their children would not be received as authentically African American because they failed to conform to the limited number of identities viewed as legitimately African American. They were also concerned that their children's African-American peers might challenge their "blackness" because they lacked the appropriate racial socialization. For example, Nia expressed concerns about the repercussions her sons would face from their peers if they were noticeably intelligent. She said

For Black boys, if you ask too many questions in a curious way, then people are like you must be a faggot, or shut up or, like what's wrong with you? And that's not okay, there is this very narrow Black... particularly in Oakland. I feel like in Atlanta (a city she lived in previously) there was a lot more room for Black boys: like you could be the nerd, or you could be the student athlete or the jock or the artist, you know. I feel like when I went to



school in Atlanta there were a lot of different ways of being Black that I don't feel are here in the Bay Area for Black boys. Like either you're socialized as White ... and go to a White school and don't really know how to interact with Black people that much; or you're a thug (2009).

Nia believed that particularly in the Bay Area, her children were vulnerable to challenges to their blackness. Her sons did not fit into any of the identities available for African-American boys so she believed they would have to demonstrate their racial authenticity by learning how to interact with African Americans from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Other mothers expressed desires to ensure their children felt comfortable interacting with a range of African Americans. For example, Jennifer, a single mother employed as a pediatrician raising one child, said, "You can tell when a black person has not been around a lot of blacks. They seem odd. I don't want my child to end up that way, so I expose him to all kinds of blacks" (2009). This mother's pediatric practice primarily served lower-income people of color, so she felt that with little effort her child was receiving these necessary exposures. For these mothers, a key part of their children being received as authentically African-American was instilling an understanding of the lives of poor African-Americans and not physically or psychologically separating themselves from poor African-Americans. The aim of providing their children with exposure to arenas of economic privilege and struggle was to produce experiential knowledge that would help define what was normal and natural in their children's world.

Overall, the mothers who sought to foster a Border Crossing racial identity in their children were raised in poor or working-class families. These mothers were often the first members of their families to become middle class. They were raised in families in which they were the first to earn a college degree and thus their middle-class status was largely attained through socioeconomic mobility. These mothers' families were often characterized by socioeconomic heterogeneity. For example, though these mothers may have attained middle class, their siblings and other relatives from their same generation may not have succeeded in reaching that goal. As a consequence of the diversity within these mothers' families of origin they often had ongoing relationships with siblings or other close relatives who had followed different life paths resulting in professional careers, working class careers, receiving government assistance, engaging in illicit career paths of criminal activity or spending time incarcerated. These mothers described visiting parents and relatives who lived in homes that were located in poor or high-crime neighborhoods. These visits both facilitated and necessitated that their children learn how to socialize with a range of African Americans from different economic and social positions.

Border Crossing mothers approached building community for their children from a perspective that I call "*Inclusive African-American Collective*." These mothers exposed their children to African Americans living in high-crime neighborhoods as well as those in middle-class enclaves. Although these mothers were situated within the African-American middle class, they resisted creating an identity for their children that was steeped solely in bourgeoisie values and experiences. Their children were raised to see their fate as linked or connected to less fortunate African-Americans. These children were often taught to understand the structural inequities that often produced negative outcomes in African-American communities and to be committed to fighting to change those structural inequities.



Border Crossing mothers often enrolled their children in extracurricular sports activities and educational enrichment activities that covered a wide geographic area. This distance mapped onto the social distance they wanted their children to be able to travel. Revisiting existing scholarship, for Lareau a swim lesson located in a middle-class neighborhood is viewed as equivalent to a swim lesson that occurs at a community center located in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood. While on the surface this scheduling of activities is exactly what concerted cultivation is about, the aim of Border Crossing mothers was not only to provide their children with a range of skills but also a range of exposures to African Americans from different socioeconomic positions. It would not be surprising if an upwardly mobile mother would seek out a community of primarily middle-class African-American families or middle-class families overall to shore up their newly attained class status. But this was not the case. Border Crossing mothers typically did not have an interest in joining middle-class African-American children and mothers' groups that often had income and educational requirements, even when these opportunities were made available to them.

For Border Crossing mothers having caregivers and teachers who demonstrated a high level of comfort with a range of African Americans was essential. In describing her efforts to find childcare providers that would not subtly communicate that African Americans were inferior Nia said,

We had an issue with another childcare provider where she would be walking and she would be scared of the people in the neighborhood. This was when we lived in West Oakland (a lower-income African-American neighborhood), and we were just like, I don't care if they are a kid, speak, you need to smile and say hello, because you see them everyday. I don't care if they are smoking crack, you could smile and say hello as you pass them smoking crack... I don't want my child to be part of that, and for them to have that concept: like, be scared of those people, you don't want to touch them, they're dirty, no...that's not okay. So we were through with that nanny (2010).

While Nia was financially able to hire a full-time nanny, she did not want her children to look down on community members that had less than them, or to be fearful of them. Middle-class status, did not shelter Nia and her family from open drug use in her neighborhood. For Nia being middle class included regular interactions with individuals smoking crack and individuals firmly situated in the middle-class in other areas of her life. She felt she and her children should have respectful relationships with both of these groups of individuals. Her description of the range of people her family regularly encounters speaks to the different context that members of the African-American middle class live in. Nia did not want to shield her children from individuals struggling with drug addiction, perhaps by driving to a park in safer neighborhoods or never walking around her neighborhood. Instead she let those individuals be a part of her children's social landscape.

Border Crossing mothers also gave their children opportunities to have an authentic and natural connection to middle-class African-Americans and arenas of privilege including elite educational and professional settings that are often predominately White and middle class. These mothers tried to achieve what Pierre Bourdieu (1987) would say is almost impossible - an



authentic and natural connection to class positions that are not derived directly from their families of origin. These children were not raised in socio-economically disadvantaged or privileged communities but their mothers attempted to provide them with routine exposure to these arenas so they would become culturally fluent in them.

One way Karlyn ensured her children gained a wide range of exposures to African Americans was in her choice of mothers' group. After attending a different African-American mothers group that she felt did not reflect her own values about race and class, Karlyn created a mothers' group that she described as being extremely economically diverse so her children would have exposure to a range of African-American experience. She recounted the events that ultimately led to her creating her own non-profit mothers group:

I went to another African-American moms groups but I thought man they are not black mommas like me. It just seemed like they were catering towards moms that were stay-at-home moms or with biracial kids and I thought you know that is not me. I am a black mother, and I just wanted to be part of a group were I felt comfortable. I mean there were people who were trying to get in stuff like Links<sup>9</sup> and Jack and Jill<sup>10</sup> and I was like, no thank you. Just, I was not interested with parting with any of my little bit of money. And I think I did not want to associate with people who defined themselves, and this is just my perception so I could have been wrong, by how much they made or what kind of car that they drove. I think what I wanted was to create something where even if you did not have any money you could bring your kids to this organization and we would figure out a way for us to connect and figure out a way for us to socialize and so forth. And just, I was looking for everyday people because my family represents everyday people (2010).

In this quote Karlyn raises several issues that divided mothers and their approach to fostering different class and racial identities in their children. Despite sharing her racial identity, Karlyn saw the mothers in the other groups as being marked by a privilege that she did not herself embrace. They were staying at home or raising biracial children, both things that did not reflect her experience and which she associated with privilege. She also explicitly referred to the organizations "the Links" and "Jack and Jill". Both of these organizations can be joined by invitation only, members must meet income and educational requirements and are required to

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<sup>9</sup> The Links, Incorporated is an international, not-for-profit corporation, established in 1946. The membership consists of 12,000 professional women of color in 270 chapters located in 42 states, the District of Columbia and the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. It is one of the nation's oldest and largest volunteer service organizations of extraordinary women who are committed to enriching, sustaining and ensuring the culture and economic survival of African Americans and other persons of African ancestry. (<http://www.linksinc.org/about.shtml>)"

<sup>10</sup> "Jack and Jill of America was founded January 24, 1938 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania from a meeting of 20 mothers under the leadership of Marion Stubbs Thomas with the idea of bringing children together in a social and cultural environment. From the beginning, Jack and Jill of America focused on instilling the values and leadership skills that would serve each child well into adulthood. The concept was so inspiring that it soon spread to other cities and other states. In 1947 Jack and Jill of America was incorporated under the laws of the State of Delaware as a non-profit organization. Today, Jack and Jill of America is a nationwide organization with over 225 chapters in seven geographic regions encompassing thirty-five states and the District of Columbia. Membership has grown to over 9,500 mothers and associates, and more than 30,000 family members. (<http://national.jackandjillonline.org/AboutUs/tabid/96/Default.aspx>)"



pay fees for participation. Despite the historical legacy of these organizations as fixtures within the African-American middle and upper-middle class, for some, these organizations are associated with elitism that excludes many everyday African Americans. For Karlyn gaining access to an economically diverse group of African-American mothers was the kind of community she wanted to be a part of as a mother and that she wanted her children to be exposed to and be enriched by. Karlyn was seeking out a community of mothers that contained African-American mothers from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. For Karlyn, as the first generation in her family to earn a college degree and attain middle-class status, it was important that she worked to help her children be successful and to ensure that they did not view themselves as better than any other African American who did not enjoy the same opportunities. Karlyn, and upwardly mobile mothers like her, distanced themselves from African-American mothers who they felt were too interested in material successes. These mothers were not “black mommas” like them- African-American, working mothers raising black children and whose lives demanded they traverse the boundaries of class and racial identity on a daily basis.

### *Border Policing Identity*

The second orientation to identity that mothers embraced is Border Policing. Half of the mothers in my sample fell into this category. Mothers who fostered a “Border Policing” racial identity in their children viewed African-American racial identity as largely disentangled from first-hand knowledge of economic struggle. These mothers also wanted their children to be comfortable in a variety of social settings but did not have the same impetus to ensure that their children were comfortable in poor African-American communities. In cultivating an African-American middle-class racial identity, these mothers emphasized exposing their children to African-American cultural activities, politics, history and certain types of music like jazz or blues. In a sense these mothers were trying to re-inject characteristics of ethnicity into African-American racial identity.<sup>11</sup> While these mothers wanted to provide an explanation about why many African Americans were less privileged, they also did not want to predispose their children to victimhood by interpreting those challenges as an excuse for not trying to achieve and ultimately succeeding in life. Several mothers highlighted that their own childhood experiences of being taunted about not being or sounding black enough influenced their perspectives on racial identity. These mothers’ past experiences motivated them to create peer groups for their children that were populated by other African-American middle-class peers who shared their academic achievements and other life experiences. They believed such peers would be unlikely to challenge their children’s racial authenticity.

Sarah described her goal of creating a community of parents and children who shared her family’s values as a way to protect her children from attacks on their self-esteem. She said,

I want my daughter to be in circles with people where they are all [achieving academically]... I want that for my kids so I am constantly seeking out like-minded individuals, people of color with children the same age. That is a personal goal that by the time they are five or ten they each have five friends- people of color with parents who

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<sup>11</sup> For a general discussion of race as denegated ethnicity see Wacquant, Loic. 1997. “For an Analytic of Racial Domination” *Political Power and Social Theory*. 11: 221-234.



have similar mindsets... so when they get to that point and they are striking out and need independence that they've got peers that are similar minded.... And when they are being persecuted and they feel like they are being treated unjustly or they feel someone is laughing at them or raising doubts about their beauty or authenticity. They can look around and see others and have strength and confidence (2009).

For Sarah, it was not just important that her children have other middle-class peers to interact with but that they be African American AND middle class. It was also important that they be from "similar-minded" families. Sarah believed if her kids knew other African-American peers who were doing the same sorts of middle-class things they did, like travel, or engage in certain activities, they would be insulated from challenges to their blackness. Also, Sarah believed having a foundation of friendship with other middle-class African-American kids would insulate her children from prospective attacks on their beauty and intelligence by non-blacks. Sarah wished to ensure that her daughter would not experience the self-doubt associated with not feeling "black enough" because of the way she talked or dressed. Border Policing mothers hoped that the material privileges that they could afford their children, based on their middle-class background combined with the psychological privileges they could afford their children, by helping them develop friendships with like-minded peers who also affirmed their racial authenticity, would diminish the challenges traditionally associated with African-American middle-class racial identity. These challenges included experiencing feelings of racial self-doubt or the need to prove one's Blackness.

Sharon underscored her desire to find a community of African Americans who shared her middle-class values. Sharon described her initial failed attempts to find mothers with similar values. She said,

Before when I went to the crazy class- I call it the crazy class. There was a black young lady mother, a new mother of twins in that class and so I asked her how she was doing ..... Her two little girls were older than mine and I knew she was kind of lost, I didn't realize how lost until one day I asked her if she wanted to go get a jamba juice or something and ...it was just like all bad and she didn't know who the father was she didn't care who the father was and everybody was trying to find out who the father was but she wasn't telling who she thought he was. It was just like all this stuff around the father of these little girls and I asked her ... what are they eating now they are two and she said well she likes hohos and she likes ding-dongs ... I just couldn't find anyone who shared my values. ...I was looking for people who would like come over and have a dinner party and bring the kids and you know we've got a swing set in the back yard. We'll all have a good time but I couldn't find that type of connection and I thought I probably never will because anybody I find with a child my daughter's age will be significantly younger than me (2009).

Sharon wished to create a community of African-American mothers that were educated, financially well off and married. She sought out mothers who could engage in what she considered to be a middle-class lifestyle and that shared her concerns for ensuring that their children were provided with the best educational and extracurricular opportunities. Sharon felt a lot of mothers did not put the kind of thought into decisions they made about their children and



didn't engage in the same level of research about childrearing. She said "you don't join a group like this one if you are not the kind of mother who cares about things like nutrition and educational development." Sharon's mother's group also provided a racial safety net for her children. For example the mothers in her group would often participate in educational enrichment activities together to ensure their children were not the lone African-American participants. Their children often brought racially diversity to activities that had previously been predominately, if not entire white. Together these mothers were able to expose their children to elite extracurricular opportunities while ensuring they would not be racially isolated.

Unlike the previous group of mothers who generally attained middle-class status through socioeconomic upward mobility, the Border Policing mothers had often been raised in middle-class households in which at least one parent had a college degree. Among mothers who were raised in working-class households, their parents typically emphasized the need for their children to acquire an education and pursue professional careers so they would become middle class. In addition, in many of these working-class households the parents of these mothers, despite earning college degrees themselves, faced shortened career ladders and limited opportunities based on the prevalence of socially accepted *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination. These forms of discrimination played a key role in stunting their parents' career advancement and prevented them from achieving middle-class status. Border Policing mothers were often raised by women who were active members and/or held leadership positions in their churches and other social and civic organizations that aimed to empower the African-American community. As adults Border Policing mothers often typically held similar positions themselves.

Mothers who worked to cultivate a Border Policing identity in their children typically worked in mainstream business settings, but their personal lives were firmly situated within the African-American middle-class community. Generally, these mothers were involved in mostly African-American middle-class social, community and religious activities and sought to develop similar activities for their children. These activities included connections to the local chapters of national African-American sororities, guilds of churches and long standing connections to African-American children and teens' organizations including Jack and Jill and the Links. Both of these organizations are comprised of African-American children, whose parents have earned college degrees or greater, have met certain income thresholds, and are invited to join by existing members. These mothers were often raised in households in which their social worlds were largely circumscribed within middle-class African-American arenas and they now sought to replicate aspects of those social experiences for their children.

Mothers who encouraged their children to embrace a Border Policing African-American middle-class identity approached community building for their children from an *Ambivalent African-American Collective* perspective. These mothers felt it was important for their children to have a connection to a community of African Americans, but they largely wanted that community to be middle class. Thus, Border Policing mothers worked to ensure that their children were exposed to the "right" type of African Americans. For example, when asked how she wanted her children to feel about less privileged African Americans, Sara, a stay-at-home mother of two, laughed slightly and then said, "To not be like them." Some mothers expressed a desire to explicitly distance themselves and their children from lower socioeconomic status African Americans. Reagan, a single mother of one child, employed as a manager for a major



retail clothing company, was more strident in her comments. When I asked Reagan what kind of relationship she wanted her child to have with the broader African-American community that might not be middle class, she responded:

Are you asking me if I want my daughter to hang out with the Laquitas and the Lanishas of the world down off of maybe International and 95th [a poor black neighborhood] assuming that is an area I would ever hang out in. She doesn't have to. I'm not full of myself. I'm not bourgie. I want her to hang around good people. People who have the same morals and values as she does... And you know, I don't want her hanging out with the ghetto children of the world (2009).

For Reagan the idea that her daughter would associate with the 'Laquitas and the Lanishas' of the world - her shorthand for poor African Americans - created concerns about her child having inappropriate exposures that would potentially hinder her success in life. While previous research has demonstrated how names that sound stereotypically African American decrease a job applicant's chances of receiving a call-back for an interview and ultimately becoming employed (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004), this comment unveils the class-based assumptions that these names carry intra-rationally. Reagan made no apologies about not wanting her daughter to associate with African Americans from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, Reagan, gave her child a name that she believed was racially nondescript. She lived in a neighborhood in Oakland that was mostly white and Asian and her daughter attended a predominately white private school on partial scholarship in San Francisco, and often spent nights at her grandmother's house to lessen the hardship of the commute between Oakland and San Francisco. Reagan also attended a church whose members were predominately members of the African-American middle class. Each of these mothers sought to distance themselves from lower economic African-American mothers and children. This was couched in phrases like "middle-class values", "not being like them" and "the ghetto children of the world."

Economically disadvantaged African-American children and their parents were often considered bad influences to be avoided. Lauren, a married stay-at-home mother, lived in an economically diverse, predominantly African-American community. She purchased a home that was catty-corner from a housing project due to financial constraints. In our interview she expressed her reluctance to let her children play with other children in her West Oakland neighborhood relaying, "It's not so much the kids. It is the parents. You know there is stuff going on. People aren't necessarily watching their kids. Nothing wrong with the kids but you don't necessarily want your child around a teenager who is messing around and getting high." Faced by similar economic constraints, Jameela, a single mother of a five-year-old son, had this to say, "I live in Richmond because it is more affordable but I don't see a lot of parents like me. I keep a tight leash on my son because of where we live. I don't want him to get involved with the wrong element. I don't know but what I see in the parents around us, they just don't have the same values as I do, as my family does." Mothers whose residential choices were similarly limited by economic constraints often felt their parenting values and practices conflicted with the parents that surrounded them. While these mothers often described children from poor families as relatively innocent the parents of these children were viewed as threats because they did not share their "middle-class" values. Examples of behaviors that were contrary to their view of middle-class values included children who cursed or used disrespectful language with other



children or adults or parents who cursed in the presence of their children, cursed at or spoke in a disrespectful way to their children or physically disciplined their children in public. These mothers drew boundaries between themselves and other mothers in the community who they felt lacked middle-class values and behaviors. These parents often did not permit their children to play with neighborhood children, instead shuttling them from one appropriate social group to another that contained the right level of racial and class diversity.

While the first group of mothers- Border Crossers- tried to cultivate an authentic African-American identity by exposing their children to different types of African Americans from different economic positions, Border Policers tried to cultivate an authentic African-American identity by exposing their children to a certain kind of African American that was steeped in middle-class experience. Overall the mothers who fostered a Border Policing identity in their children sought out exposures to other middle-class African-American families and children through African-American mothers' and play groups, sororities and/or religious affiliations. Border Policing mothers also wanted their children to have an understanding of why some African Americans were not as financially well off but they typically explained challenges faced by less fortunate African-Americans in the language of the culture of poverty. They encouraged their children to see that people had different experiences and backgrounds that influenced their life outcomes, but they also emphasized that ultimately, these individuals had the ability to choose to make better decisions and create a better life. Thus, while these mothers encouraged a limited feeling of connection to less fortunate African Americans, they simultaneously used their children's exposure to this group as a source of examples of the outcomes of poor choices.

### *Border Transcending*

Finally, a significant minority of mothers (one-sixth of my sample) encouraged their children to adopt the racial identity of "*Border Transcending*." These mothers wanted their children to be free to embark on post-racial lives. They often explicitly emphasized that perhaps this would not be possible in other parts of the United States but that it was a viable option in the Bay Area due to the region's greater acceptance of individuals from diverse racial backgrounds. Cara, a self-employed mother of two said, "Hey, the world is changing, Obama's the president now, maybe in their life being black won't be as important to them as something else." The fact that the citizens of United States had elected an African-American as their President signaled things might be changing to this mother. Cara's statement reflected the perception among Border Transcending mothers that their children might have a broader range of ways that they would be able to choose to identify and be readily accepted as within mainstream society.

Border Transcending mothers wanted their children to understand that part of their identity was being African American, but they did not want their children's lives to be primarily defined by their racial identity and, at the very minimum, did not want to push one particular manner of identifying on their children. For example, Cheryl did not want to privilege racial identity in how her children identified and instead encouraged them to pursue their own paths. She said, "It is important to know who you are in terms of your cultural identity, not just in terms of race but also in terms of being a Californian or being a person who lives in Oakland, or being a person who is an educated professional or being a skier or a Star Trek geek, or whatever it is."



Thus, for Cheryl, racial identity was one of many legitimate categories that her children could choose to emphasize. These mothers hoped that the promise of a post-racial society might become a reality for their children and race would be of decreasing importance in their lives.

Among Border Crossing mothers issues related to racial identity or group affiliation were not prioritized over other issues in society. For example, Kristen asserted in her interview that,

My children will have lot of challenges. Who knows what the environment will be like in the future. I try to instill in them a respect and reverence for mother earth. At night at dinner we thank mother earth for the food that we have and the animals that died that we eat. We respect those animals. It will be a reality they are dealing with, climate change and the environment. Their issues will be different (2010).

Cheryl believed that the big issues her children would face in their lives would not be related to their racial identity. These mothers felt that issues related to racial identity and racism should not be privileged over other issues such as protecting the environment and decreasing world hunger. Indeed, issues of racial identity and racism were often viewed as diminishing in importance for these children.

Mothers who worked to foster a Border Transcending racial identity in their children typically came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds but shared a common experience of belonging to racially diverse communities. This diversity came from one or more of the following sources: 1) their families of origin, such as parents or relatives, 2) through interracial romantic relationships or marriages; and/or 3) through racially diverse peer groups.

Border Transcending Mothers sought to foster this racial identity in their children by approaching community from a “*Global Collective*” perspective. In doing so they worked to create a community of pan-ethnic/racial middle-class peers for their children in which no racial group dominated. African-American issues were not highlighted as a primary focus for their children, but instead these mothers urged their children to be concerned with injustices faced by any group. For example, while mothers wanted their children to be aware of race they did not want them to feel compelled to join or be associated with African-American middle-class social organizations. For example Cheryl, describing her thoughts about joining Jack and Jill or the Links when her children were older said, “If they are not doing something that is interesting we aren’t going to join a group just because they are black.” For Cheryl, providing her children with access to an African-American middle-class group of peers was not a sufficient reason to join an organization.

Many of these mothers grew up in diverse settings themselves and felt they greatly benefited from that diversity in their lives. For example, Kristen said “I would never put [my children] in a situation where it was predominately one race or another.” Similarly Cheryl relayed “I’ve never known what it was like to be in an environment in which everyone was exactly the same...I don’t want that for my kids.” These mothers valued communities that were not just diverse along traditional African-American and white divisions but that included members of a wide variety of racial and ethnic groups, sexual orientations, and religions. The next section examines the concerns that mothers had for their children that were related to



intersections of racial identity, gender and class.

### **Managing Difficult and Deadly Challenges: Racial Identity, Class and Gender**

The deadly dangers that African-American men from all socioeconomic class backgrounds face were described in comments made by Michelle Obama when now President Obama was seeking to be elected as the first African-American President of the United States. When asked by 60 Minutes' correspondent Steven Kroft about any concerns she might have for her husband's safety Michelle Obama responded "I don't lose sleep over it. Because the realities are that as a black man Barack can get shot going to the gas station (Michelle Obama 60 minutes, February 7, 2007)." Despite the fact that her husband had achieved many markers of middle-class status, he graduated from Harvard law school, taught at the University of Chicago, was elected to the United States Senate and was now running for the highest office in the United States, Michelle Obama expressed her belief that he was primarily seen through a racial lens. In short her anxiety about her husband's safety might be intensified but it was not a new anxiety. Several of the mothers that I interviewed referred to Michelle Obama's comments as they described their own fears for their sons' safety.

Mothers also had concerns related to ensuring their daughters developed good self-esteem but these worries seemed far more manageable. After all, their daughters were not perceived as physical threats in the same way that their sons were and were far less likely to be faced with situations for which their response could mean the difference between life and death. Sarah's comments identified both the concerns mothers had about their daughters seeing themselves as beautiful and how they approached cultivating good self-esteem. She said that she and the mothers of other African-American girls she knew

Work hard to make sure when we put [our daughters] into activities they are together. When they go to ballet they are not the only brown girl in the ballet class. So they see beauty in books and they see themselves represented in books and movies. To make them understand that beauty is not about race or color. You know, I think it has improved a lot in the last twenty years since I was a kid. Growing up, I don't remember seeing a book with black faces in it. Whereas I think of my daughter now, I make an effort to go out and if I see a book with a brown girl, I buy it. And so I make efforts for her like that, just to give her that sense. I think that is one of the struggles of black woman. The definition of beauty in society has nothing to do with what is black (2009).

Sarah's comments illustrate the overarching concerns that mothers had regarding their daughters' self-esteem. These mothers were raising children in an era during which the popular kids' show *Sesame Street* broadcast a video that encouraged black girls to "Love their hair" and movies like *Good Hair* that exposed negative attitudes about African-American women's natural hair. These mothers believed that their daughters were barraged with messages that they were unworthy and unattractive because they did not have the right skin color, facial features or hair texture. Mothers also worried about their daughters' future romantic prospects. A number of the mothers I interviewed remembered having some degree of anxiety about social events like school dances at the predominately white school they attended in their youth. Several mothers highlighted that they ultimately attended these sorts of events without a date or an appropriate African-American



male escort was located for them through church or other family contacts. Projecting into the future these mothers often wondered if, and hoped that, there would be boys (both African-American and from other racial groups) who would be interested in their daughters romantically and ask them out of dates. While all mothers shared similar concerns regarding their sons' safety and their daughters' self-esteem each group of mothers managed these concerns in different ways. Border Crossing mothers generally used *Experience Management* to address gender and race related challenges, Border Policing mothers used *Emotional Management* and Border Transcending mothers used *Environment Management*.

### *Border Crossing Mothers and Experience Management*

Border Crossing mothers' primarily (though not exclusively) used an approach I call *Experience Management* to manage concerns related to gender and racial identity. Through *Experience Management* these mothers tried to ensure that their children acquired the cultural acumen that would enable them to interact in a variety of settings out of the belief that this would serve them well in the future. These mothers enacted this *Experience Management* by shuttling their children to different activities that were comprised of African Americans from a range of positions. For example, Karlyn was single and a mother of two- a son and a daughter. She said, "I worry about my son because he is not growing up with the kind of 'hood' mentality that me and his father had but he will have to interact with those people." This mother highlighted that her son is not completely ensconced within the safety of a middle-class community. The reality for Karlyn was that her son was perceived in a range of different ways. Teachers saw him one way, police officers saw him another way and African Americans from different socioeconomic backgrounds saw him in other ways. Her son's reality is that in order to navigate each of these arenas he needs to have some level of fluency in the rules of engagement of each. In some situations he would have to emphasize the cultural repertoire of African-American identity, in others he would have to emphasize his middle-class identity and at times combinations of the two. Karlyn felt that lacking regular exposure to environments like the one she was raised in put her son at a distinct disadvantage in his interactions with fellow African Americans who did not share his middle-class status.

Karlyn believed her son needed to understand how others might treat him so he would be able to navigate a world in which he was primarily viewed as an African-American boy, rather than a middle-class kid. She felt this was essential for her son's survival so she ensured her son had regular contact with his father, who she was no longer married to, and to other African-American men. She also discussed media and community examples of clashes between African-American men and the police with her son and engaged in something she called prepping for life. She said "I talk to [my son] constantly. We do scenarios and we talk about stuff. I'll pose a situation like say if you are ever kidnapped what do you do? If the police ever pull you over how do you need to react? So we do scenarios for all of that, its just prepping for life." Karlyn described how she would ask her children what they would do if a friend of hers tried to pick them up from school, a stranger approached them in a bathroom or a police officer approached them on the street. What is striking about these examples is that mothers often viewed child predators and police officers as equally dangerous for their sons. Karlyn used experience management as the key way to prepare her son for the challenges he would likely face.



Similarly, Maya used experience management to prepare her daughter for the challenges she believed she would face as an African-American woman. Maya's daughter spent several years in an all African-American educational environment that was Afrocentric. She believed that her experience at that school, combined with her daughter's activities with community groups focused on girl's empowerment validated both her intelligence and beauty as a young African-American woman. Maya believed that as a consequence of these experiences when her daughter entered into high school, a racially diverse and economically stratified environment, she had the necessary foundation to be confident inside and outside of the classroom.

### *Border Policing Mothers and Emotional Management*

Border Policing Mothers primarily used *Emotional Management* to manage the challenges their children would face related to intersections of racial identity and gender. These mothers focused on helping their children manage their emotions or find appropriate places to express "normal boy or girls activities" so they would be well received in the classroom setting. Sarah articulated the problem of ensuring the safety of African-American boys in this way, "When you are a black man and you get stopped by the policeman you can't do the same things a white person would do because they might already have some preconceived notions and that might get you into a heap more trouble." Sarah shared the concerns of the majority of mothers in my sample who feared for the physical safety of their sons.

In describing what I have classified as emotional management, Heather a mother of three said "I'm hoping to get [my son] into enough relaxation type yoga classes so he is a little bit calmer when he does go to school. I want to make sure he lets it all out in the play yard and activities after school." These mothers feared that their African-American sons' behaviors in the classroom would be interpreted as aggressive when similar behaviors from white boys would be interpreted as playful. As a consequence these mothers looked for ways to help their sons maintain control over their emotions. Border Policing Mothers emphasized to their children that there were times and places to express feelings. For example, if children believed they experienced racial discrimination they were advised to refrain from responding in the moment. They should instead step back and think about how to best approach addressing the incident, which might be reframing their grievance in a way that was more racially palatable to others. This approach was encouraged to prevent their children from being labeled overly sensitive about race or "the angry-black child."

Managing concerns around their daughters self-esteem started early for many mothers. Sharon, a Border Policing mother, managed these concerns by joining an African-American mothers' group to provide her daughter with a sense of self-esteem and worth. She described her decision to join this group by saying, "Part of [joining] was wanting her to have a strong sense of self and being prideful of who she was but at the same time really being comfortable being in, really, any environment. But feeling grounded or centered with people that were like her." Sharon believed that by providing her daughter with this race and class specific peer group early in her life she would have the emotional support to avoid insecurities about her self-worth and beauty. The end product of this emotional management was described in Heather's example of her proudest moment as a mother. She described that while visiting a predominantly white private school her daughter was given the opportunity to play with current female students who



were all white and playing with baby dolls. The lone black doll was not being played with by any of the children. Her daughter entered into the room saw the black baby doll and ran to it scooping it up exclaiming, "Oh my goodness! Look at this beautiful black baby and her beautiful black skin." Within moments the seemingly discarded black baby doll became the center of attention and all of the white preschool girls wanted to play with the doll. In the ensuing weeks this mother said the school had to order additional black baby dolls to quell disputes between the students who, she opined, now saw the value and beauty in the black doll because of her daughter's actions. Heather believed that her daughter saw the value in the doll, and asserted its value publicly because of the effort she put into building her daughter's positive racial self-esteem. Overall, these mothers did not want their daughters to experience self-loathing or self-doubt that made them question if they were smart enough, attractive or worthy of the same happiness as others. While the first group -Border Crossing mothers- sought to provide their children with a range of experiences that would enable them to learn how to react to the gender and race related challenges they would face in certain situations, Border Policing mothers focused on encouraging emotional restraint. Controlling emotional responses to challenging situations was viewed as the key skill their children needed to master as members of the African-American middle class.

### *Border Transcending Mothers and Environment Management*

Border Transcending mothers typically used the approach of *Environment Management* when managing challenges related to gender and racial identity. Rather than seeking out particular experiences like Border Crossers, or helping children manage their emotional response to challenging experiences, like Border Policers, Border Transcending mothers managed the race and gender related challenges by focusing on excluding sources of discrimination from their children's lives. These mothers often described their communities as racially diverse liberal enclaves in which they were frequently engaged in frank and productive discussions, albeit abstract, about racial identity, racism and sexism in society. For example, Cheryl said:

I think a lot of black people don't talk about race with white people, and we do all the time. It doesn't matter who you are we are going to talk about race. Then again, we have a fairly liberal progressive group of friends who aren't just white and black, they are multiple races and multiracial within themselves and so I think that race comes up as a part of normal conversation, and gender comes up as a part of normal conversations or politics or religion or being gay or whatever just because who we hang out with is very super diverse (2010).

While these mothers highlighted that race, gender and religion often came up in discussions, these topics were primarily connected to appreciating and recognizing the diversity in their community rather than addressing issues of discrimination or prejudice. When discussions about discrimination and prejudice did come up these experiences were viewed as removed from their immediate communities and not directly part of their daily lives.

One example of this environment management can be seen in how mothers managed screen time for their children. Most modern parenting advice provided by doctors and popular parenting books advises parents to avoid television until their children reach 2 years old and to



limit the amount of “screen time” for their children thereafter. These books often highlight research that early and excessive exposure to television might negatively impact brain development and lead to childhood obesity. Absent from the litany of potential negative effects of television watching was a concern voiced by many of the African-American middle-class mothers, that I interviewed, particularly Border Transcending mothers, that exposure to images of African Americans on television would negatively impact the racial self esteem of their daughters (and to lesser degree their sons). Karin talked about her plans to restrict the television exposure of her children in part because she did not want her daughter to grow up shaped by media images of African-American women that are portrayed as having the wrong hair and skin and being undesirable to all men. She recounted that because of her own parents restrictions on watching TV she didn't see Lisa Turtle, the black female character on *Saved By the Bell*, a popular 80's show marketed to preteen and teenagers, continue to go dateless season after season. Reflecting further on her own experiences Karin said because of her parents' restrictions on the amount of television she watched the blow was less severe when as a child a white girl in her summer camp told her she looked like Nell Carter, the overweight black housekeeper on a popular 80's sitcom, *Gimme a Break*<sup>12</sup>. Karin was not familiar with the show or with the actress so the insult had not really resonated with her. She pondered the damage that insult might have inflicted on her self-esteem had she actually had any knowledge of Nell Carter and the show. Based on her own experiences Karin wished to similarly insulate her daughter from these potential stings to her self-worth, confidence and esteem and thought limiting screen time- time in front of the TV or computer- would partially fulfill that goal.

Border Transcending mothers also often placed their children in environments where they became the known African-American child. The hope was that overtime their children would be transformed from the black kids to the Jones' kid and race would no longer be a salient feature in their experience. While mothers in this group were committed to their approach to racial identity and community, they also voiced concerns about what would happen when their children left these protective enclaves that were relatively free from racism. For example, Cara said,

My son has always been very international. When he was a kid he had girlfriends from a range of nationalities and ethnicities. There are so many mixed race kids in my kids' environment and in our family so [race] hasn't been an issue. But we went on a road trip to the Midwest and people would stare at us as if they had never seen a black person before (2009).

In this quote Cara describes the safe community bubble in which her children typically reside but also referred to experiences when this bubble has been occasionally popped when her children interacted with the world outside their usual community. Similarly Rachel said, “My son thinks he is street smart but he is used to being in an environment in which he is known. No one thinks of my son as a black boy, they think of him as my son, but when he goes out into the real world people will make assumptions about him. I have been trying to explain this to him a little but I don't think he really gets it.” While these mothers worked to insulate their children from experiences of racism by creating liberal and diverse communities of middle-class families, they feared when and how that protection would no longer be possible. These Border Transcenders

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.sitcomsonline.com/photopost/data/985/nell6.jpg>



often expressed concerns about what would happen when their children were confronted with how African Americans in other areas were treated.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how mothers approached cultivating identity for their children from three perspectives that were differently shaped by orientations to racial and class based identities (See [Table 4.1](#)). Mothers who attained middle-class status through socioeconomic mobility primarily fostered a *Border Crossing* identity in their children. These mothers encouraged their children to retain links to the broader African-American community, not just those who are middle-class, by approaching community from an *Inclusive African-American Collective Perspective*. Being authentically black was associated with having some understanding of economic struggle and being comfortable navigating in communities with less fortunate African Americans. These mothers provided their children with the skills to respond to gender related challenges as they intersected with race through *Experience Management*. They did this through a combination of interactions with African Americans from different walks of life and through exposures to concrete examples of potential challenges they might face as African-American men and women.

The *Border Policing* identity was primarily fostered by mothers who had grown up in middle-class families, some from families that had been middle class for several generations. These mothers wanted their children to have links to a middle-class African-American community but did not have the same desire for their children to have connections to poorer African-American communities. These mothers instead focused on the cultural, historical and political aspects of African-American identity. They did this by approaching community building through and *Ambivalent African-American Collective Perspective*. These mothers provided their children with the skills to respond to gender related challenges as they intersected with racial identity through *Emotional Management*. These mothers emphasized that their children needed to maintain emotional composure in stressful situations and they also worked to develop peer groups for their children that would serve as emotional support to them throughout life.

Mothers who were currently imbedded in racially diverse middle-class communities primarily fostered the *Border Transcending* identity. These mothers did not want to push a certain way of identifying on their children. They encouraged them to have some knowledge of their racial identity, but also be concerned with the struggles of groups from other ethnicities and parts of the world. These mothers approached community from a *Global Collective Perspective*. These mothers provided their children with the skills to respond to gender related challenges as they intersected with race through *Environment Management*. Through *Environment Management* these mothers sought to eliminate any racial and gender related challenges that their children might encounter but expressed anxiety about when these protective settings would no longer be possible.



**Table 4.1**  
**Intersectional Approaches to Parenting**

<b>Racial and Class Identity</b>	<b>Mothers' SES Background</b>	<b>Orientations to Community</b>	<b>Management of Challenges</b>
Border Crossing	Newly Middle-class	Inclusive African-American Collective	Experience Management
Border Policing	Historically Middle-class	Ambivalent African-American Collective	Emotion Management
Border Transcending	Racially and Economically Diverse	Global Collective	Environment Management

These three distinct orientations to identity demonstrate that being African American AND middle class is not just about acquiring the appropriate exposure to and skills from extracurricular activities but it is also about attaining a certain cultural acumen of authentic blackness which itself varies within the African-American middle class. Part of that cultural acumen includes distinctive strategies that mothers used to address their children's race and gender related challenges. Those concerns focused on safety for sons and self-esteem for daughters. In addition, these findings show that racial, class and gender identity were not concerns that reared their heads occasionally, but instead were continuously present in parental decision-making.

African-American middle-class mothers' varied conceptualizations of identity for their children demonstrate the tensions associated with integrating being both African-American and middle class. Distinctions in how mothers conceived of African-American middle-class identity influenced the quality of their children's connection to the broader African-American and mainstream communities. These connections often produced tensions for children. On the one hand, children were encouraged to view those that were less fortunate than their own families as having made poor choices but on the other hand children were at times encouraged to understand how social and structural inequities played an important part in producing the misfortunes of African Americans. Children were also encouraged to not believe they were better than other African Americans but were also cautioned not to succumb to materialistic habits and the need to be viewed as "cool". Likewise children were encouraged to see their own success as a product of their own hard work but at the same time they were, at times, encouraged to challenge the structural inequities that hold back so many fellow African Americans.

These orientations to middle-class African-American identity showcase the increasing diversity in how members of the African-American middle class chose to and can identify. These findings suggest diversity in how African-American middle-class mothers are conceptualizing racial identity for the next generation. Specifically, what it means to be authentically African American varies within the African-American middle class. However, challenging Frazier's prediction, African-American middle-class mothers are not merely seeking to assimilate into white society but are instead seeking to integrate some version African-American racial identity with a class-based identity. Border Crossing mothers continued to envision their identity as tied to less privileged African Americans. By contrast Border Policing mothers did not view African-



American identity as tied to economic struggle. Instead these mothers emphasized the cultural and historical components of African-American identity. Lastly Border Transcending mothers sought to reproduce the multiracial communities and identity they experienced in their own lives for their children. While Border Transcending mothers often did not emphasize African-American identity this did not mean they were trying to assimilate into a white identity. Instead Border Transcending mothers worked to create a pan-ethnic/racial community of peers and parents for their children where racial diversity was the norm. Thus, rather than class trumping racial identity or vice versa, these categories of identity shape each other.

While African-American middle-class families have access to greater economic resources, they still must contend with the challenges of raising children that are treated differently based on their race and gender. Addressing these challenges required that mothers equip their children with certain skills or that they create communities that are relatively cleansed of those challenges. While many African-American middle-class mothers engaged in concerted cultivation, the activities they choose for their children were equally influenced by their desire to foster certain connections to racialized and gendered understanding of middle-class status. Thus racial identity was not an issue that occasionally required consideration in how they parented their children. Being middle class could not be divorced from being African American or from being a boy or a girl. Instead race, class and gender together shaped parenting decisions. While these mothers believed ideally their children's middle-class status should largely ensconce them within a realm of safety that provided them with good educational resources and protected them from harsh treatment from society, the reality was that being African American provided them with less access to these realms of safety and benefits of middle-class status. As a consequence mothers believed they had to prepare their children for the racialized ways they would be received by the wider society. While the African-American middle-class mothers I interviewed employed strategies that middle-class mothers of other racial groups might employ in raising their children, there were additional strategies that these mothers utilized to address the race, class and gender specific challenges their children would face. These strategies included creating specific peer groups for their children and choosing schools, neighborhoods, and extracurricular activities based on a combination of factors including diversity. These mothers realized that they and their children needed to work to make their class status visible to whites in order to reap the benefits of middle-class status. These mothers also knew that, at times, they and their children might need to make their middle-class status less visible if they wished to retain meaningful connections to a broader African-American community.

While this research cannot be generalized to all African-American middle-class mothers, it begins to uncover both the consistencies and the variations in the ways that African-American middle-class mothers think about and make decisions related to fostering racial and class based identities in their children. My findings begin to uncover the categories of importance that shape African-American middle-class mothers' views on racial identity, gender and class and where those categories of importance converge or diverge from those shared by white middle-class mothers. In particular, these interviews revealed how African-American middle-class mothers sought to construct and preserve specific versions of middle-class identity that were compatible with being African American.



Finally, it would be easy to think of African-American middle-class mothers as a case that highlights exceptions to the norm. However, I argue these findings make a more significant impact on how we as scholars should approach research on the family. Shifting the center of analysis to the experiences of African-American middle-class mothers requires that we rethink how intersections of race, gender and class influence the parenting approaches of all middle-class parents. Thus rather than explaining an exception to the norm, the norm, itself, becomes particularized as something that has been produced by a particular set of circumstances that have not been shared by all mothers and families.



## Chapter Five

### **Conclusion: Integrated Mothering- An Alternative Ideology Of Mothering and Parenting**

In my dissertation I have examined how the ideologies, practices and experiences of motherhood are differently and actively constructed by and for African-American middle-class mothers. Using an intersectional analytical framework I have examined 1) how African-American middle-class mothers have been excluded from dominant versions of middle-class motherhood, 2) African-American middle-class mothers' attempts to be included, even if only momentarily, within those dominant versions of motherhood and 3) how these mothers have worked to create their own mothering communities that reflect and reaffirm their racial identity and class orientations. My findings demonstrate that the theoretical assumptions of mothering and parenting that dominate family and work life scholarship are supported by racially distinct cultural expectations and practices that have not until now been adequately considered. These assumptions include the view that 1) mothers are principally responsible for raising their children within a nuclear family 2) working outside of the home conflicts with being a good mother and 3) class trumps racial identity in determining how middle-class mothers parent their children. Each of these assumptions is also supported by specific economic, cultural, social and political/legal configurations of work, mothering and the family. My research shows how differences in these configurations matter. For African-American middle-class mothers' these differences include their longstanding position within the labor market and cultural pushes from both inside and outside of the African-American community that demand mothers be economically self-reliant. These differences also include cultural and structural factors that have produced long traditions of extended family and community supports for childcare. They also include the need to navigate the ongoing impact of racial identity and racial discrimination in their own lives and the lives of their children.

It might be tempting to view African-American middle-class mothers' approaches to work, family and parenting as an example of inclusion-centered (Choo and Ferree 2010) or intracategorical (McCall 2005) intersectional research that principally repairs a gap in the literature by including a previously understudied perspective. This research does more than add an additional voice to the choir of diversity. These findings demand that we revisit existing dominant analytical frameworks of family and work to critically examine the subjective perspectives from which they have been derived. This research requires that we reconsider other racial groups of mothers who have at times been revered and at other times vilified, both historically and in the contemporary 24 hours news cycle. One example is Amy Chua (2011), the self-proclaimed "Tiger Mom"<sup>13</sup> who accepts the view that parenting occurs within a nuclear family context and involves intensive mothering practices but challenges some of its related permissive, noncompetitive and "feel good" philosophies. Ultimately, the experiences of the African-American middle-class mothers in this study serve as an empirical challenge to key assumptions regarding middle-class motherhood and parenting overall and underscore that several theoretical revisions to dominant ideologies of motherhood of parenting are required. As

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<sup>13</sup> Amy Chua is the author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom*. This book critiques western approaches to raising children that emphasize children pursuing what makes them happy. Chua privileges teaching children life skills that will enable them to be successful adults.



research on family and work has been previously construed, it has assumed all mothers are responding to a similar set of cultural and structural constraints and opportunities. My research suggests that assumption is profoundly flawed, not just for African-American middle-class mothers but also for other groups of mothers.

I have proposed that African-American middle-class mothers are confronted by an alternative ideology of motherhood and parenting that I call the “Integrated Mothering” ideology. This alternative ideology of motherhood differs in its assumptions regarding how mothers should approach childcare, combining work and family, and parenting their children. This ideology assumes that 1) childcare is a mother-centered but extended family and community supported activity, 2) working is a duty of motherhood and 3) rather than racial identity trumping class, considerations of racial identity, racism and socioeconomic class should be consistently considered in determining how to best raise children (See Table One below).

**Table 5.1**  
**Integrated Mothering Ideology**

<b>Childcare</b>	Extended Mothering: Mother Focused but Extended Family and Community Supported.
<b>Work and Family</b>	Integrated Devotions: Paid Employment is a Duty of Mothers.
<b>Parenting</b>	Cultivating Consciousness: Race Conscious Middle-class Parenting

These different assumptions underscore the cultural, racial and economic specificity of dominant versions of motherhood. While I have provided an outline of the contours of this alternative ideology of motherhood, African-American middle-class mother have diverse responses to it. One cannot look at this ideology and then predict the behaviors of most African-Americans middle-class mothers. Rather this ideology represents the different cultural expectations that these mothers are confronted by from both the mainstream and their own communities when making decisions about work, family and parenting. Of course African-American middle-class mothers don’t live in a vacuum and they are aware of intensive mothering practices but my research suggest that they largely do not use that version of mothering as the primary guide to their own mothering.

My findings demand that scholars attend to the cultural specificity involved in research focusing on motherhood and work-life balance. I have tried to present a framework that more fully takes into account how the motivations and underlying processes that produce different versions of motherhood and parenting are raced, classed, and gendered, not just for African-American middle-class mothers but for all mothers. By mapping out how African-American middle-class mothers parent their children, my research highlights the distinct challenges these mothers face in reproducing middle-class status for their children. In addition, these mothers have different concerns based on the gender of their children. For these mothers their African-American daughters face difficult challenges in their future and their sons face deadly challenges. Despite the economic advantages of being middle class, these mothers work to



provide their children with the skills that will enable them to overcome the race based challenges that they will likely encounter in their future. These mothers must also teach their children how and when to emphasize their racial identity and emphasize their class identity. African-American middle-class mothers are not alone in being confronted with different historical and contemporary experiences that influence their decisions related to work and family and how they approach parenting their children. The lessons that we learn from these mothers encourage us to more closely examine the beliefs and practices of all mothers.

### **Cultural Distinctions in Middle-Class Motherhood**

As I complete the manuscript analyzing the data from my dissertation four news stories relevant to my overall argument have emerged and captured the attention of the American public. The first news story focuses on how the increase in multigenerational households is now producing changes to how homes have been constructed in new developments over the last few years (Glantz 2011). While this may seem like a minor news story what it highlights is a potential cultural push for a new formulation of the family for white Americans. American society is currently weathering a period of economic strife. While there has been some improvement, the recovery in the average citizens' financial life has been slow. As I describe in greater detail in Chapter 2, there has been an increase in multigenerational households across all racial groups except for African Americans. This increase is related to the global financial crisis and the economic recession that began in 2008, the rising cost of healthcare and the infeasibility of retirement. In the 1950's and 1960s adults were encouraged to marry, have children and form independent nuclear families. Grandparents were urged not to become burdens to their children. Grandparents in poor health were encouraged to accept life in a nursing home and those in good health to continue living independently. This time frame represented a period during which the family form shifted to the nuclear family and this new formation led to different expectations of the duties owed to each other as immediate and extended family members. Increasingly, that atomized version of family life is not possible. Countless media outlets have described the "new" and increasing phenomenon of the multigenerational household. They have showcased the experiences of families that have recently become multigenerational and described its benefits and its detractions. Benefits have included free childcare and thus an economic savings. Others benefits have included avoiding foreclosure of one's home by pooling economic resources with others. Some news stories have focused on ways to make the living arrangements more comfortable for everyone and in doing so have signaled that we are settling into a new phase of American family life that is likely to endure for some time. While these stories represent a new push towards a more interdependent family form that may be required during these difficult times, multigenerational families have always existed in sizeable numbers in the African-American community. Thus, while embracing caring for the extended family represents a shift for white Americans, particularly those in the middle-class, it represents the continuation of a practice for African Americans. What this news story also reveals is the work that must go into creating these new expectations for family life and structure. This work must occur at both the cultural level in viewing this new configuration of the family as acceptable and the structural level of creating homes that better accommodate these families' needs.

The second news story focuses on the conflict between Ann Romney, the wife of Republican presidential hopeful, Mitt Romney, and the Democratic strategist, Hillary Rosen.



Rosen described Mrs. Romney as “never having worked a day in her life” despite being a stay-at-home mother who raised five children. This exchange momentarily raised the temperature of the mommy wars to a boil, typically remaining at a low simmer. The majority of news outlets have framed the debate as whether raising children should be defined as “work.” The obvious answer to that question is yes. A less publicized discussion of this exchange has focused, not on what is defined as work, but how who is performing the work impacts how it is valued and defined. Raising children is considered work if it is done by a white middle-class mother and raising children is considered idleness, laziness and having a lack of work ethic when done by poor African-American women and other women of color. For poor African-American women paid employment will bring them dignity, not engaging in the work of raising their children. Dividing mothers into those who need work to provide them with dignity to those who do not represents a continuation of the logic used in 1920s to exclude African-American mothers as beneficiaries of Widows Pensions. White mothers who were widowed were viewed as worthy and deserving of support and unsuitable for available work as domestics. By contrast, African-American mothers who were widowed were viewed as unworthy, undeserving and suitable for a range of employment options. Administrators of these programs believed that African-American mothers did not need help because they had always been able to work in the past. This logic of the worthy and unworthy mother informed the creation of controlling images like the welfare queen that stigmatized poor women of color on welfare who were engaging in the work of raising their children. It also creates the need among African-American middle-class mother to use their employment and/or marital status to assert their worthiness in middle-class circles. It created the stigma that Kristen described in Chapter 3 that surrounds African-American middle-class mom who can afford to choose to stay at home but, nevertheless, are assumed to be on welfare. When scholars have looked at mothers as groups they have generally assumed that they face similar constraints. While mothers do face similar constraints how different groups of mothers respond to those constraints and how society expects different groups of mothers to respond differs dramatically based on intersections of racial identity and class. These factors can produce a market/family nexus where combining working outside of the home with being a mother creates a sense of conflict or integration.

The third news story focuses on the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin. Mr. Martin, an African-American male teenager was visiting his father who lived in a gated community in Florida. While walking home from a convenience store carrying an Arizona Ice-Tea and a package of Skittles intended for his younger cousin a neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman, began following Mr. Martin because he believed he looked suspicious. Despite being told by 911 operators to stop his pursuit of the young teenager, Zimmerman ultimately shot and killed Mr. Martin. Mr. Zimmerman was initially released from custody without being charged based on Florida’s Stand Your Ground laws that permit an individual to use deadly force if they believe their life is in danger. It took a national movement, weeks of pressure from the public and media and a special investigator to finally file charges against Mr. Zimmerman. While the fate of Zimmerman remain unknown, as a result of these national pressures he will have a day in court. The Trayvon Martin case exemplifies the distinctions in the concerns that African-American middle-class mothers have for their sons versus their daughters. Martin was walking in his father’s “safe” middle-class gated community. This was a community in which a neighborhood watch existed. But this community was not safe for Trayvon. Despite being the child of one of the middle-class families from this community Trayvon was not viewed as a nice



middle-class kid walking home from the store, but was instead primarily viewed through the lens of racial identity and gender. He was viewed as an African-American male-and, thus, interpreted as a threat. In response to Trayvon's death African-American mothers and fathers have gained a national platform to underscore the daily concerns they have for their son's safety, not just from the police officers but fellow citizens. The death of Trayvon Martin prompted Associated Press Writer, Jesse Washington (2012) to write "Trayvon Martin, my son, and the Black Male Code." This editorial amounted to a heart wrenching but matter of fact description of how his son should behave in affluent neighborhoods and in interactions with police officers and others. While these instructions may have damaged the spirit of his son, something that I describe mothers sought to protect in their children, they were also meant to ensure that his son appeared unthreatening, did not raise suspicion in others and remained alive.

The fourth and final news story is actually a recurrent one. Every few years a representative of elite women enters the spotlight to unveil their version of what managing work and family is really like. In 2003, their self-appointment representative was Lisa Belkin who published the now infamous article "Opt-out Revolution," essentially arguing that women were not reaching the top ranks of corporations because they were choosing to focus on a job they believed was more important- motherhood. The article created a firestorm of responses from other journalists and academic scholars, some supporting the views of the mothers and other issuing fierce critiques of Belkin's claims. Family and work life scholar Pamela Stone's (2007) *Opting-Out?: Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home* was written in direct response to Belkin's article and provided a more rigorous analysis of the complicated nature of women's limited choices in the face of enormous structural constraints. One of the most recent spokeswomen has been Anne Marie Slaughter, the former director of policy planning at the State Department under the Obama administration. She penned the doom and gloom editorial, "Why Women Still Can't Have it All." Again, the voice is an elite white woman, who acknowledges the privileged perch from which she speaks, but quickly returned to reiterating her perspective that is loaded with problematic assumptions about the definition of good motherhood, the family and how children should be parented. This perspective includes assumptions about how families should be configured in terms of who does what and when. Other assumptions about what kids need to be okay and from whom they need those things (a parent, preferably a mother, in a nuclear family form). There is no getting around it; there is a "stalled revolution". Women now engage regularly in the public sphere of paid work but they must do so on largely male terms. The envisioned ideal worker remains a man who does not have obligations at home. Little has changed on the home front for women, except that for many their role as caregiver has shifted to care manager. I would suggest that having it all should not just be about women being able to climb the upper tiers of their chosen career trajectory while also being the same dutiful caregiver at home as the idealized mothers of the 1950s and 60s. There are ways for women to participate in both the public and the private sphere that do not generate the harsh compromises that have registered in the experiences of elite white women.

These alternative ways of organizing work and family require we rethink how families function and are configured. Perhaps it requires building networks of instrumental support such as childcare and household support with other parents, relatives and communities so we do not feel that our nuclear families must fulfill all of our needs. I argue that this requires a shift in how elite white women think about parenting and mothering, one that African-American middle class



mothers have made long ago. We also need to inspect what it means to have it all from a perspective that includes the experiences of men and non-elite women. Indeed, some men, often those who are economically elite and white, have largely been able to "have it all" because of a specific gendered division of labor in our society that produces a market/family nexus of conflict. This configuration of family and work encourages men to focus far less on the home front, and historically provided low wage labor, often from women of color, to support white women in accomplishing the tasks of the home. In any event, part of "having it all" might mean sharing it all, that is sharing the work and home fronts in ways that honors them equally but might structure them differently and, perhaps produced a market/family nexus of integration.



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